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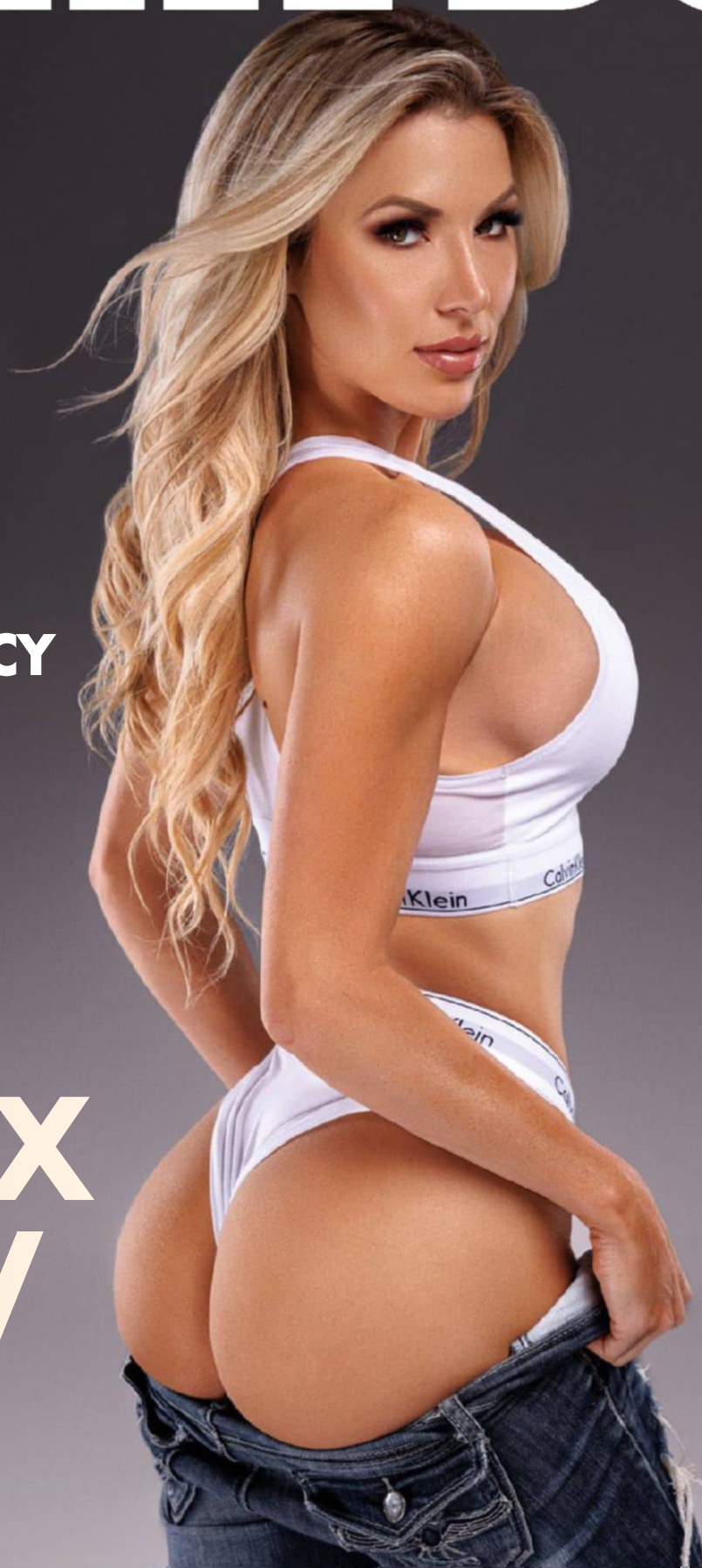
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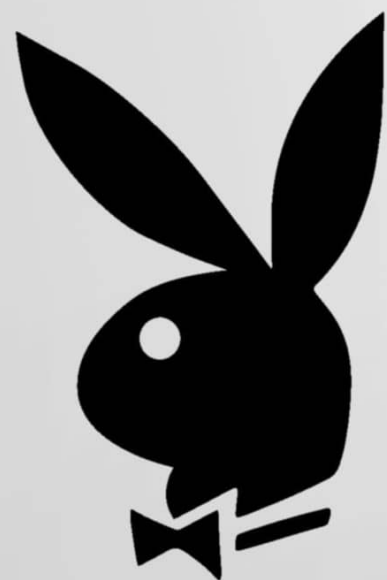
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CONTENTS

06	ANTI-CONFEDERATE APPAREL Killer Mike's clothing label
20	PLAYBOY FICTION: INSIPIDITIES Joni's search for happiness leads to hotel hookups
32	JORDAN FIRSTMAN The sexy impression chameleon
52	HOW TO HANDLE A PREGNANCY SCARE Pro-tip: stay calm
56	JAY HOWELL & SLOW CULTURE On their sprawling show 'Playboys & Girls'
72	NO FILTER Lola Kirke speaks her mind
78	A GREAT ROCK BAND Inside the epic War on Drugs
92	TOXIC MASCULINITY How do we fix it?

12	PICTORIAL ANDREEA IULIA
42	ON THE COVER ALEX KAY
64	PICTORIAL JESSICA ERIN
84	PICTORIAL ERIN ELIZABETH
	ISSUE No 146 September 2024





***Why* Hip-Hop's
Killer Mike is
Making
Confederate-
themed Clothing**

Killer Mike has always used his music to negotiate his views about race and politics. Now, on the heels of the recent violence in Charlottesville, the rapper is expressing them through a new line of anti-Confederate apparel

BY **LIZ SUMAN**
IMAGES BY **KILLER MIKE**

As we continue the nationwide debate over whether marble and stone statues of Confederate fighters should fall under the protections of the First Amendment, hip-hop mogul Killer Mike is creating an opportunity for people to express their anti-racist beliefs on their bodies via his new clothing line, released in the aftermath of Charlottesville.

A longtime advocate of social equality who routinely speaks and writes on systemic racism, the Atlanta-based activist and Grammy-winning rapper regularly uses his music, both as a solo artist and a member of Run the Jewels, to negotiate his political views. Now, he’s employing the bodies of his fans.

The visual centerpiece of his new line, Winners and Losers, is a graphic of a basketball scoreboard that depicts side-by-side Confederate and American flags with a score of zero-one. The line is a pragmatic, idealistic and unemotional critique of just how subtly racism continues to unapologetically thread itself through American culture. In releasing his t-shirt and tanks, which may be viewed as controversial by some and celebratory by others, Killer Mike is hammering his message that Americans have the right to celebrate their views—as long as they do it peacefully. Playboy talked with Killer Mike to discuss his latest break into fashion, the president and the state of racism in America.

Was the concept for your new line brewing before Charlottesville?

Yeah. I’m a Southerner. The people on both sides are my neighbors. I’ve grown up with Confederate memorabilia and flags and swag my entire

life. There’s a picture of me as a 10-year-old child wearing a Dukes of Hazzard cowboy hat with the Confederate flag, cowboy boots and overalls. As a Southerner, you’re accustomed to seeing the flag.

My source of contention has always gone back to when I took Georgia state history from Mr. Flowers in the eighth grade. Mr. Flowers was a white Alabama football coach and a wonderful history teacher; he just retired this year. He helped us understand that the South seceding put it at rivals with the United States of America, and it lost. In losing that war, it also lost its right to hang its memorabilia. For most of my life, I understood it as less about ‘Hey, it’s a hateful game or reinforcing slavery,’ and more about, ‘Hey, you defied a republic and you lost, so you don’t get to hang in the winner’s circle with the crew.’

That view gets lost in the debate sometimes. If my neighbor threw up a Confederate flag and invited me to a barbeque, I’d gladly go to his barbeque. He can fly his flag and cook me barbeque. But the minute he tries to put that flag over the tax office where I go to buy my license plate, then, no, you can’t do that because you guys tried to defeat your country and you fucking lost.

Is it a symbol that upholds slavery? Yes, because the institution of slavery is what funded the South. It’s what made the planter class rich. So, when they say states’ rights, what they mean is the rights of states to keep slavery. The bigger issue has always been that you’re essentially asking me, with my tax dollars, to honor people who attempted to break the union. That’s dishonorable. Should you have Confederate memorials? Absolutely. They should be on private land or in cemeteries or museums.

“Should you have Confederate memorials? Absolutely. They should be on private land.”

With that said, do I want to blow off the face Stone Mountain tomorrow? No, other stuff is higher on my priority list. But I want people to understand in raw terms why I feel that people who follow the Confederate heritage narrative don’t get to have their flags and monuments in front of government buildings. And there’s no better way to explain stuff to an American than a sports analogy.

Most of your pieces depict a single image or declarative phrase. How do you think the message will translate across demographics?

[*Winners and Losers*] is a clever shirt. I think that smart people will get it and wear it. The kids who are rocking it, get it. Between it and my shirts that reads “kill your masters”, they’ve been two of my most popular. Someone asked about the Kill Your Masters shirt, saying, “Well, what does that mean?” I said, “Well, what other advice would you give someone who was enslaved?” [laughs] I just try to put what people try to present as complex, but to me they are very simple issues.

Why do you say that sports analogies are effective ways of presenting messages about politics?

The Lie Cheat Steal Kill Win shirt is a play on the old Nike shirts from the 1990s that read “Just

do it” and “Winners.” But all of the athletes we fucking loved, from Mark McGwire to Lance Armstrong, were doing steroids to win. To me, the truest sports are allowed to be the same as politics. You lie, cheat, steal, kill and win. You do whatever it takes to be in the winners circle. So, the shirts are satirical.

Has this president actively increased the number of racist people in America or instead given existing racists a platform?

I’ve experienced an environment like the one now all my life. I grew up with black students in a city that was run by the Democratic Party in a state that was Republican and run by whites. So, I’ve felt this hostility my entire life. If you live in Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, North Florida, either of the Carolinas and even Virginia, you’re accustomed to this. Black people certainly know it’s here.

If nothing else, Trump’s presidency has shown the rest of the country that we still have a long way to go. I don’t know why black boys dying at the hands of the police for the last five years doesn’t show you that. I don’t know why a vigilante killing a black boy on the border doesn’t let you know that. For whatever reason, when that young man drove that car through that crowd and killed that young lady, it put the world on notice that this



Editor’s Note: Playboy has decided to include this image—which includes a visual representation of a Confederate battle flag—as an opportunity to educate those who may not know what this flag looks like or what its history is. This Confederate battle flag (pictured in the left corner of each article of clothing) has long symbolized many southerners’ historical support of slavery and, in recent years, has been associated with white nationalist groups and their ongoing opposition to civil rights.



country has a long way to go in maturing our race relations. We need to get out of these primary, child-like narratives in which we're being picked on and we feel bad because we don't get what we think other people are getting by way of special collective services. We have acknowledged that we have a system in the South and nationwide that's unfair to groups of people. If we don't try to fix it, we keep our country in this weird stagnant place of these never-talked-about racial tensions, until an explosion like Charlottesville happens.

What are the best ways to effect change on what you're talking about? You put out your line of shirts and make music—what about the rest of us?

Act locally. If you're a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant in this country, you already know the rules are skewed in your favor. If you are going to be an ally, be an ally. Stand with them when they're not around. Challenge people who look like you on their bullshit. When you hear subversively racial shit in the classroom or on the job, confront it. If it comes from your family, confront them.

One thing that black people could do is to better practice group organizing and economics. The stronger your communities are by supporting black stores, restaurants and things of that nature, the stronger your community is in terms of self-sufficiency.

Our white allies, our white brothers and sisters, we need you to challenge shit. One of the most beautiful things I saw [last] week were white football players kneeling or putting their hands on the shoulders of black football players who support Colin Kaepernick. It shows that we have allies across the board, and that's what we need from our white Anglo-Saxon Protestant allies.

“

The problem isn't in the president. The problem is in the proletariat.”

Whether you're liberal or conservative, there's this collective sense that something positive may come out of the volatility. Agree?

The atmosphere in this country racially speaking is similar as it was under presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, under Barack Obama and now under Trump. At a certain point, the problem isn't in the president. The problem is in the proletariat. Because we've decided to be comfortable in our anger and guilt, we've gotten a president who, in his audaciousness, reminds us of ourselves. So, the silver lining to me is that Trump shows us undeniably that we have a long way to go.

We need a wake-up call once every two to five years in this country. People in the black community have been waiting for [some] organizations to be called terrorist organizations for more than 100 years. [After] the death of a young white woman who was an ally to my community, finally the news had to call it terrorism.

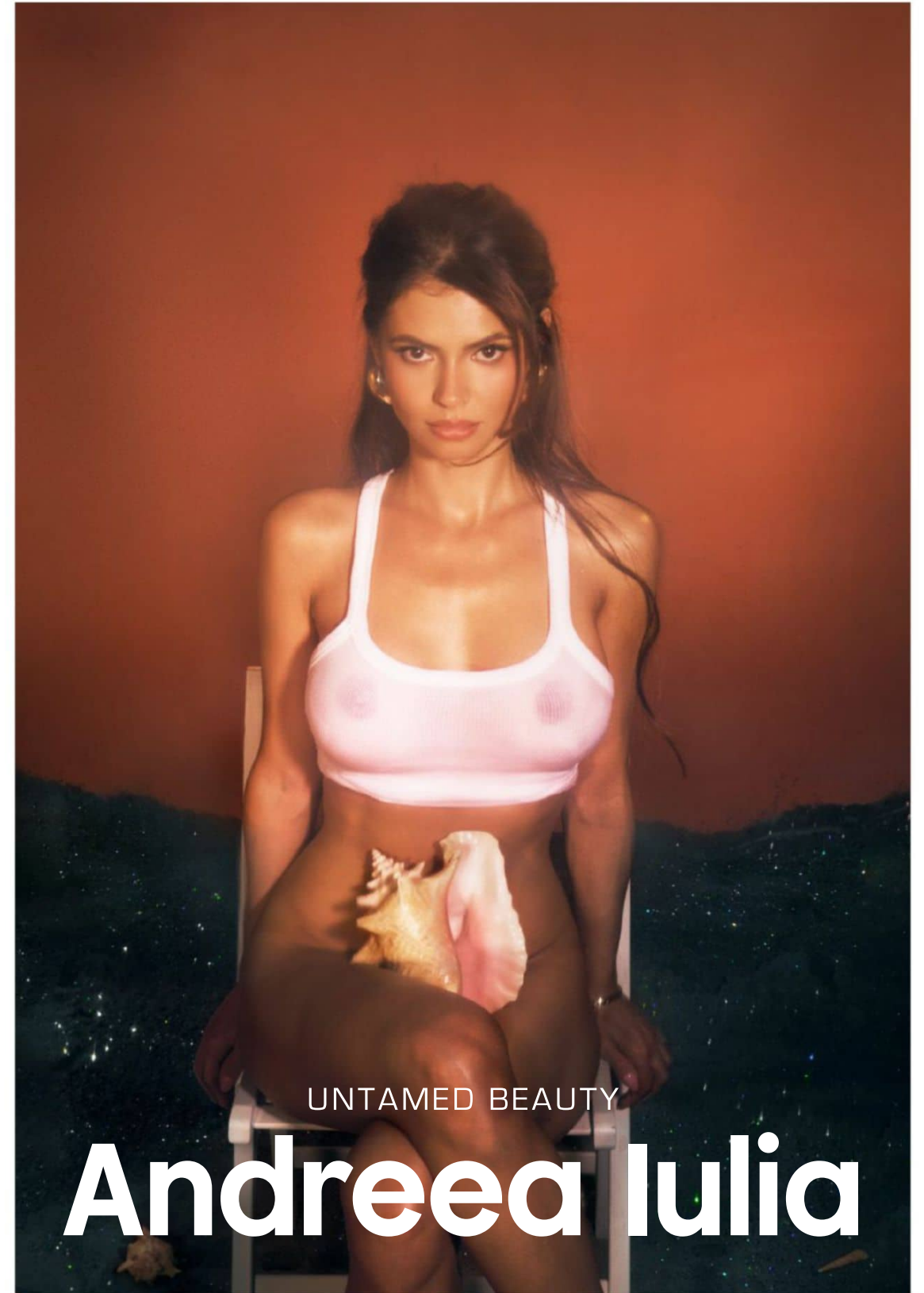
It wasn't terrorism when Sandra Bland was murdered. It wasn't terrorism when Dylann Roof walked into a church and killed people. So even in the way we report, we have to understand our internal biases and we need to start the change there. I'm not a fan of trying to shut them up. I believe in the First Amendment. They have every right to march. What they don't have the right to do is mow down people or walk into churches and murder people.

What do you have planned next—politically, musically, sartorially?

I'm supporting [Georgia state Senator] Vincent Fort for mayor [of Atlanta]. He stepped away from the Democratic Party to support Bernie Sanders. He was very brave to do that. I'm working hard locally to get him elected.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Better days are right around the corner, if we decide to do the work. If we don't, then we'll spend another 53 years in this perpetual systemic racism hating one another. I'm ready to move past that point.



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We're happy to have you featured. Can you give us a bit of background on your career as a model and where it all started? Thank you for featuring me. My career as a model is still in its early stages, a recent journey that began with a blend of curiosity and a passion for fashion. I've stepped into this realm with a sense of excitement and a commitment to growth, embracing each new opportunity with enthusiasm. I'm excited to see where this path will lead and am grateful for every step along the way.

How do you usually begin your day? I begin my day with a hint of charm and a generous pour of coffee. After all, even a playful soul needs a bit of refinement before embracing the world.

If you could spend a day doing anything you wanted, what would it be and why? If I could spend a day doing anything, I'd have breakfast in bed with my favorite book, take a spontaneous trip to a beach with perfect waves, and end the day with a sunset dinner and great conversation. Why? Because a day filled with good food, adventure, and a little romance sounds just about perfect to me! Plus, who wouldn't want to mix a bit of fun with some well-deserved relaxation?

What are your favorite ways to unwind and relax when you're not working or traveling? When I'm not working or traveling, my favorite way to unwind is with a good book, a bubble bath, and some music that makes my soul smile. If I'm feeling extra indulgent, I'll add a cup of chamomile tea with honey and maybe a little dessert because relaxation should be sweet in every sense of the word.

Do you have any hidden talent, if so what is it? Yes, I have a hidden talent for making snacks disappear at an alarming speed. I like to call it a superpower.

What's the best place you have ever been to in the world? The best place I've been? I have a feeling my upcoming holiday in the South of France will top them all. It's likely to be a blend of elegance and relaxation that I can't wait to experience.

What are some of your biggest dreams you hope to achieve? Certainly! One of my biggest dreams is to open a boutique hotel in a picturesque location,



where guests can experience a mix of luxury and local charm.

3 things that you can't go a day without **Three things I can't go a day without?** A good cup of coffee to start my morning right, a touch of laughter to keep the daylight, and a moment of quiet reflection to stay grounded. Each one adds a little flavor, joy, and balance to my day.

Looking back, what advice would you give to younger yourself? Looking back, I'd tell my younger self that it's perfectly okay to be different there's real beauty in standing out. I'd remind myself that beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder, so don't take things too personally. And most importantly, I'd say that you have the power to create your own reality, don't be afraid to chase those dreams.

That said, what advice would you give to all the women out there when it comes to love and relationships? When it comes to love and relationships, I'd tell all the women out there

to never forget to love yourself first. It's the foundation for everything else. Know your worth, don't be afraid to set boundaries, and remember that real love enhances your life, not defines it.

Are there any qualities or traits you find particularly attractive in a partner and what do you value the most? I find a good sense of humor, a kind heart, and a touch of deliciousness particularly irresistible in a partner it's the perfect recipe for charm! I value someone who can make me laugh and who brings a sense of adventure to life. But most of all, I appreciate someone who's genuinely thoughtful and makes the little moments feel extraordinary. A well-timed joke, a thoughtful gesture, and just the right amount of deliciousness? That's my ideal combination.

Thanks so much for your time, Where can our readers follow you on social to stay up to date on what you're up to? Thank you so much for having me! Your readers can keep up with me on Instagram @giulia_1st.





Playboy Fiction: Insipidities

Joni longs for a life of the mind but settles for illicit visits with married men and sweaty hotel hookups with clients

WRITTEN BY MARIE CALLOWAY

PHOTO BY UNSPLASH

David: In order to understand quantitative easing you have to understand what a bubble is. Basically, a bubble happens when the value of assets—that’s stocks or houses or something—just starts going up so much that people feel like they’re wealthier. They haven’t actually gotten any more income, but the assets they own are worth more and more. Say you have a house and it triples in value and so you think of yourself—your net worth—as being a lot higher, so you go out and spend more money. That’s called the wealth effect. Have you heard of that?

Joni kicks her shoe so that it skims right past David’s ankle and lands beneath the blackboard where he’s standing.

David turns to look at her. Their eyes meet briefly before each turns away, Joni’s face flushing. She bites her bottom lip.

Joni: No.

They are in an empty classroom at Columbia, where David is a graduate student, a transplant from South Africa.

David: So the wealth effect is the fact that when the value of your assets rises you spend more of your income. You save less money because you feel like your house is doing the saving for you. So, asset bubbles, wealth effect. What happened in these recent bubbles was based in housing. A really high percentage of GDP growth in the 2000s was from people borrowing against the value of their homes, taking out loans on their homes and spending the money. Like if you bought....

David continues, but Joni does not hear. His voice is a sound that pleases her, that enters her and leaves her just the same.

She had genuinely wanted to learn when she asked David to tutor her—paid him R1,900.00 for his time and companionship—but she finds herself unable to follow. Impressive-sounding, incomprehensible words flow in and out of her ears, as if she were listening to a lecture in French. She focuses on the things she likes, sensual things: the sound of his accent, the tap of the chalk as he writes, the silhouette of his tall, slender body, the air of authority that being at the front of a classroom gives him.

And she likes the feeling of breaking a rule, of sneaking into an empty school she isn’t even enrolled in after midnight, the sense of camaraderie she felt gliding through the large empty hallways in the dark with David. Perhaps it is the air of the illicit that makes her unable to focus on economics.

David: Do you have any questions?

David fetches the champagne she brought for them and the mugs he stole from the staff break room and sets them next to her. She slides her bottom across the black table, reaches up and gently places her arms around David’s neck, softly kissing the sides.

He doesn’t stop her, but he hesitates. He is looking straight ahead, seeming not to know what to do.

Joni runs her chubby fingers through his blond hair and continues to kiss his neck and ears. He kisses Joni’s mouth lightly.

David’s eyes reveal a trace of something he is normally able to suppress. He places his hand on Joni’s thigh.

David: I’m going to get in trouble for kissing my students.

They gather the champagne and mugs and walk to the staff room. The mood changes. Joni cannot keep the momentum going, does not know what to say to David now. He washes the mugs silently. When he is finished he looks past her as if to say it is the end of her lesson, time to go home now, school is done for the day.

As they walk by David’s office, Joni places her hand on the doorknob and turns to face it. She does not want to leave him. Joni looks over her shoulder at David.

Joni: I have to show you something.

His guilt is getting in the way of her pleasure, yet it is also indirectly part of the cause of her desire for him.

She walks into his office and sits at his desk, which is covered in a flurry of books and student papers.

David follows her, closing the door behind him but for an inch.

David: What do you have to show me?

He sounds as if he knows she is up to something.

Joni stares shyly at the dull linoleum floor. She thinks about calling the whole game off, but she does not want to give up so easily. She thinks, I have to answer his question—he is the teacher, after all—and so she lifts her black dress to reveal large white breasts, sagging out of a purely decorative quarter-cup red lace bra.

David: Oh, those are impressive.

Joni: See, it’s cute. Because of the lace.

David: Yeah.

He nods absentmindedly.

Wordlessly, mindlessly, he approaches her, and his slender hand, ringed finger and all, reaches out and touches her breasts delicately, cups them. David always handles her so gently. He is the only man ever to have touched her in a way that was always pleasant. But six months after they met, friends of friends, she wonders if it is that same gentleness (timidity perhaps) that makes him run away after just a kiss. Will he finally give in tonight?

She places her fingers on his belt buckle and snakes toward the clasp. He sighs wearily.

David: It’s getting late. You should probably go home.

She has been too rash, and David has panicked and sent her away.

David is married, afraid of taking advantage, afraid of intimacy. But Joni doesn’t care. She wants him to get over it. She wants him to fuck her in his office. She has long fantasized about a professor or TA like David leaning her against the bookcases full of Marx and Ricardo and taking her. The fact that he is married and 15 years her senior only adds to it. His guilt is getting in the way of her pleasure, yet it is also indirectly part of the cause of her desire for him. How much longer will it be until she can feel pleasure? Or is it actually just the chase, the anticipation that she enjoys? It doesn’t seem to matter. Time is running out. She is 23, too old—in her mind—to be a schoolgirl. Too old to be thrilled by sleeping with older men, married men.

A long cab ride home to her Alphabet City apartment. She stares out the window. New York is hideous, with gray dilapidated buildings and filthy streets mottled with failed asphalt and garbage heaps. And the people are even worse. It’s like living inside an eternal cocaine comedown. Why does anyone live here?

In New York she always wants to break the rules because she can’t fit in, isn’t capable of it. She wants to want to learn about economics, but all she can focus on is sex with the man who is supposed to tutor

her. She is a bimbo, and true to bimbo form she cannot accept it. Even though she always ends up like this, vaguely humiliated after his polite rejection. “Misery and the Bimbo Form.” Yet she will continue to surround herself with smart people like David.

It is unsurprising but eye-opening how it follows, from the statement (often incorrectly attributed to Primo Levi) that Palestinians are the Jews’ Jews, that whores are women’s women. Textbook.

Honestly, one reason I sense that sex workers who aren’t forced into the trade are subject to so much hatred is that the implication of their work is that the patriarchy doesn’t spoil general heterosexual relations. And that a woman can use sex to her own ends. I don’t mean that in an idealizing way regarding how sex work actually operates; I mean that there’s a fundamental refusal of the premise that “sexual access” in itself is a kind of harm or wrong, which is what is absolutely implied when you hear about patriarchy being all about sexual access to women. It certainly is, in part, but that doesn’t mean you confront the patriarchy when you deny sexual access.

I’m not sure I’m expressing this with the requisite nuance.

Put another way, it’s the structures of sexual access, rather than the desire for it, that get conflated. And the latter usually supplants the former in critiques of sex work, porn and so on, and it tends to focus on women who find their sexuality viable. Not unproblematic, not painless, just viable. And not because they’re brainwashed by patriarchy, but because they happen to be well-adjusted against the ubiquitous sexual conservatism.

But many people are deluded that we live in a world of sexual liberation. The mainline feminist argument is that women are not sexually liberated but men are—at women’s expense. Not in my view. Men sexually exploit women all over the place. That’s not a product of liberation but of the ongoing conservative organization of sexual exchange. The fact that women can’t access men sexually in anything like a public and impersonal way says everything about this.

George: You know, you remind me of...an actress from a French film.

Comparing a doughy ginger like Joni to a Karina or a Bardot is laughable. No, she is more reminiscent of a Todd Solondz character. But he knows that, and

he knows how to flatter her. Still, she has never been able to fully suspend her disbelief.

He had asked her to meet him in front of Coffee Shop on 16th Street near his office in Union Square, where he works as a bespoke shoe-maker. She feels embarrassed standing in front of such a place, with its garish blinking neon sign and NYU freshmen clientele and fried plantains covered in off-puttingly red ketchup.

She isn't ashamed of the things she does for money; she's done worse for free.

They have not seen each other in eight months. She likes his well-fitting corduroy suits, his blond hair and the thick-framed glasses he wore specifically because he's aware of Joni's infatuation with intellectuals.

George is Joni's older married friend. She remembers part of their very first conversation:

Joni: Do you have a wife?

George: Yes, but I don't have a girlfriend.

But now, he tells her, he has five of them.

George: Sometimes I feel bad, cream-pie-ing these 21-year-old Jewish girls on the floor of my office. But I'm like Don Draper. I'm thinking of pitching a column about my sexcapades to somewhere like Esquire or PLAYBOY, somewhere with real money.

Sensing Joni's disapproval, he defends himself.

George: In New York there are so many beautiful girls, it's like a buffet! I mean, wouldn't you?

Joni smiles, unsure of what to say.

George: Nah, you'd just have a bite of potato and go to bed.

They walk in silence. Joni does not want to go to his office but follows him there anyway.

George: I remember you being quiet. I don't remember you saying nothing.

It's true. She has still not forgiven him for the night after the Verso party.

Who goes to a Verso party?

Bitchy East Coast girls who grew up in an idyllic Boston suburb and went to Sarah Lawrence, who have parents who read books (instead of growing up in a cultural wasteland that exists solely to provide casino service and labor, in a family where avoiding teenage motherhood and attending a third-tier state college were almost unattainable achievements). Pompous girls who desperately want to be boys or—lower in the hierarchy—catering girls who serve a purely aesthetic and/or care role to the boys.

Mediocre, mean, arrogant boys. So many of them. More boys than subway rats. Rat Bastard who had twice (twice!) soberly hit and humiliated his girlfriend in public apropos of nothing. Now he is held up by New York as an example of a good male feminist—in contrast to all the bad ones, and there are so many bad ones—but he's good, he says, because he critiques his own overwhelming but problematic instinct to protect women.

Joni heard a blonde catering girl squeal to him, "Your dog is such a Situationist!" and climbed out on the fire escape. Or tried to. Her sock caught the corner of the frame and she fell on her knees. ("Fuck!") Partygoers saw her and scoffed. She climbed down to the street and called George, not knowing who else.

They were in his office then too. She sat on that

Joni guzzles the champagne and eats steak with her bare hands.

rug—the cream-pie rug, apparently—legs crossed, revealing pink panties, eating a rare steak with her bare hands. Chewing deeply into thick sinew, ripping it apart, myoglobin trickling between fleshy fingers—she licked it off like berry juice.

An "old-fashioned meat-and-potatoes British affair" is what George called it.

He gave the black delivery boy a 50 percent tip to impress her and she did feel happy, yet slightly embarrassed, when the kid jumped for joy.

She excused herself to go to the bathroom down the hall. She needed to expel the six tall boys of Bud Light, whose brackish taste she did not like but which she chose knowing they would sneer at her at the Verso party for drinking it. Those quiet looks that said so much. Sitting on the toilet in the dim gray bathroom, Joni imagined their disgust: Very tacky. She seems to pile on the carbs as heavily as her makeup. Graceless. Graceless.

She certainly felt graceless when she returned to find George holding her phone, looking through her



e-mail.

George: Isn't that funny! You're having sex with everyone but me. Can get all these hot JAPs but can't get a hooker to do it with me.

Despite all the clammy, unwashed body parts that had been jammed inside her, she had never felt so violated by a man.

Joni's mind reels; why did she agree to meet with him today? She once liked him because he had taken her to see the delicate My Night at Maud's at Film Forum, had eaten steak tartare out of the palm of her hand at Balthazar ("like a good boy") and because she had sat in his office on calm summer afternoons sipping R75.00 iced tea, admiring the jovial, charming way he interacted with clients and how he gently, meticulously spent hours perfecting a child's tiny leather shoe.

But that seems long gone. Now there's just this. There is only ever this moment. An obnoxious alcoholic who trolls Tinder for girls (age range 18 to 25), too cowardly to admit to himself what he is doing (see: his wife's supposed "tacit agreement") yet too much of an asshole to be ashamed and not brag about it. He is a man who calls himself Super Dad for taking off one afternoon a week from cheating on his pregnant wife to bring his son to the park. He embraces no conclusion, no role entirely.

Joni's rule is that if you do something, you should do it completely. She would like to say that no matter how many flaws she has, she wants to fully experience the consequences of her actions. Her favorite example is how she tells herself she is an escort and so she is the most high-end escort one can be. At least when one weighs 162 pounds. She ignores the ways in which she does not measure up. She loves to make generalizations, black and white. It makes life more comprehensible. Amy, her old friend, had told her that relationships are a "dynamic process." But she wants a right party (Joni) and a wrong party (whom-ever she disagrees with), determined by completely static rules. Amy was now convinced she could not enable Joni to do evil things like date a married man. ("We don't do that!")

Joni hates moralizing. "Let us have a bit of fun first." She often thinks about Molly Bloom's soliloquy—has read it many times, listened to it being performed—but has not bothered with any other Joyce, does not care. She likes to read it at face value, feels validated by it. A bad feminist looking for a good time.

Of course, here she was with George, but did it count if she didn't verbalize it? Just flash a smile and play with her hair, forming the mosaic of George in her brain. After all, she was neither sleeping with George and having a torrid love affair nor ignoring him and, what—maybe telling his wife?

His wife. George's favorite pastime is justifying cheating on his pregnant wife.

George: I'm not saying I deserve a medal for what

**His pungent
whiskey smell
nauseates Joni.
He cannot stop
telling her
about his penis.**

I did. Cleaning piss out of the sheets, rubbing vomit out of the carpet. And once when she was drunk, we were fighting and she was standing in the door of our bedroom and said, "You're not man enough to hit me." So, so I did. And I was made out to be the bad guy, when she started it! What was I supposed to do, Joni?

As he says this he staggers toward Joni, grabs her wrists and presses his body to hers. His pungent whiskey smell nauseates Joni. He cannot stop telling her about his penis.

George: Do you think I'm a scumbag for having sex with a hooker? It was a classy R11,300.00 one. And I think I was quite a change of pace for her. First I thought, She's faking it, she's faking it, whatever, but then at the end I started to really give it to her and she says, "You are like a passionate Italian man, not British!" Some Russian girl who could barely speak English.

He hiccups.

George: Now I'm going to sit down and you're going to sit on your Uncle George's lap.

As he moves to sit she pushes him off her so that he falls to the floor, and she escapes. She cannot stand to talk to that kind of man for free.

Why is my life so lurid these days? she wonders as she begins to cycle—her thick, firm legs the only solid part of her, the only powerful part of her. Those legs that turn the wheels of the vintage banana-pudding-yellow cruiser, the one she bought for R1,150.00 on Long Island three months ago. The one her friends laugh at due to its rust and bodiless pedals but which she loves, truly loves.

The leftist reading group meets every Wednesday night at six. A different kind of left than the Verso

party crowd. People who've spent their lives working and avoiding work and sneaking away at work to read obscure Turkish communist texts, people whose parents couldn't pay for them to go to Harvard or Brown and who go on to intern at n+1. People who didn't secretly aspire to become socialites among The Nation's readership.

Sarah: —moved away from the Communist Party, put out things that were kind of crucial to the commie left in the 1960s and of course the 1970s and Bologna was also a leading intellectual working on oper...oprerr...workerism—and some of the other things that are important at this time is a movement away from the traditional labor movements and the women's movement, the student movement coming in and having to redefine what the workers' movement was, now that it had been sort of starting to separate from the traditional labor movement. And so a lot of these articles are attempting to reiterate, like, what to do with that split. And the way that Tronti describes that I find really nice, that the moment of discovery has returned, that the time of political vanguards is over and that gives us a new way to discover political organization——

A circle of chairs in a classroom.

Joni is late; she is always late. Late or not, it doesn't matter. She is never present. She drifts in and out of listening, does not care about any of this. Even her wish to care is vain and insincere. She wants to be an impressive orator, wants to destroy rat boys in political debates and wants someone to declare her intelligent. She wants to hang around now as much as she did when she first met them and thought to herself, These people are intelligent and compelling and I want to be them.

She nods at sophisticated-sounding remarks her fellow readers make and waits impatiently to gossip with the more socially competent members afterward. And they certainly gossip. Two hours later at a nearby bar, of a long-haired particularly odious and bespectacled Stalinist boy:

Paul: He wrote this shitty article and in the comments section, a scan of a kill order from his beloved Italian CP against leftcoms and Trots, and said, "Is this what is aspired to?" They write these shitty socdem papers. So boring. You can even tell who their Ph.D. advisors are 'cause they'll, like, wheel out the hobbyhorse of their advisor's old papers at any opportunity. [breathlessly] "This calls for guaranteed minimum income!" I don't get people who think leftist politics are about, like, somehow for 40 years we've failed to market these reforms right and we have to find some magic formula to sell them to people. If history hinges on these cretins' amateur-hour PR, then that's the most depressing thing ever——

And so on. She doesn't understand but loves the gossip, the tone, the ability to feel like an insider, as if she has some special knowledge (even if only superficially by association) that makes her privy to something no one else in New York knows. But she doesn't really know. Joni has been a part of the group for only four months. Joni decides that she can leave, that there is no chance of having anything to contribute, that she lacks all context. She has to leave, actually, because she must work tonight.

"Are you going to be okay?"

The warm Manhattan night makes her feel calm but sickly. She breathes deeply. She is not drunk, yet the air will make her sober.

She hails a cab to the Renaissance Hotel.

Yes, she has to work. Unlike the real Marxists, Joni does not hate work. She only dreads everything leading up to work: how she must jam her legs into

**In stinging, sham-
ing fluorescent light,
heart racing, she
assesses herself,
pink clammy fingers
spread on pink dry
flesh.**

forever-running stockings and fasten unhookable hooks before finally throwing it all on the floor, telling herself that men don't even like lingerie anyway; the car sickness she feels as she clumsily attempts to apply eyeliner in the back of a cab; the lotion she rubs on the patches of missed leg hair before scraping it away with a pink disposable Bic. A boy once told her he understood the uneven division of affective labor and that's why he doesn't mind paying for girls on dates. If only clients were so understanding, paying her her hourly rate for the time it takes to get ready.

But tonight she does not do any of that. It does not feel necessary.

She stumbles into the elevator and presses her head against the metal for support. With her eyes closed and the cool, sticky feeling of the metal

pressed against her swollen face, she thinks back to several months before.

The day after her 23rd birthday, David had suddenly, cryptically asked her over Facebook Chat if she'd like to meet for coffee at Ninth Street Espresso. It's true that the night before they had shared a first kiss, and it's also true that they had held hands, running, laughing, pleasantly warm air in their faces, Joni's comically stocky legs pumping, trying to keep up with David's long slender ones. And it's even true that when they had stopped and David announced he couldn't go to the bar because he had to work, she had slapped him. He sputtered indignantly as she ran away, wide-eyed, manic and giggling. And it's true that when they met at Ninth Street Espresso she had cheerfully shown him the photos of her stumbling around half-naked in the bar the night before, near-blackout intoxicated.

David: Joni—I think you're very beautiful and sexy and really interesting. You're just my type.

Joni could not contain the smile her joyful expectations created, clutching her hand to her racing heart, thinking, Oh, he's complimenting me—he's going to ask me out!

David: But I'm not ready. I freaked out when you kissed me.

Stupefied silence.

Joni: I'm not good at these conversations.

David: I'm not either.

A lull.

Joni: [Pleadingly] I'm not...socially...adept... enough...to navigate...this conversation!

She stared at the ground, sucking on her thumb, and brushed her hair in front of her face.

David sighed softly. She hoped he saw her then: vacuous, struggling, not just unwilling but actually incapable of responding. His eyes stopped scanning; he changed into someone easier. The superficial but courteous and patient person she imagined he became when he interacted with his younger, slower students.

David: So did you read those books I gave you?

Joni: Yes, I really like Women as Lovers. But I didn't start the other one yet. Um.

They both stared at the adjacent wall.

Joni trembled. She could not stand sitting in uncomfortable silence—a situation she was intimately familiar with, one that never stopped feeling like suffocation. She suddenly nodded.

Joni: Will you walk me home, please?

Soon they stood in front of Joni's building.

David: So, see you around?

Joni nodded again, thinking, Not all boys can handle being slapped. Even though they all deserve it.

In her apartment complex's elevator she pressed her cheek against the metal doors, trying to cool her burning face.

Yes, that day was so humiliating. She isn't ashamed of the things she does for money; she



knows she has done worse for free.

But now she is being paid. She is on a different date. A four-hour dinner date with an investment banker.

He does not comment on Joni's intoxication.

She holds him, strokes and gently pecks the top of his fat bald head. She feels genuine affection for her clients, but only in a customer-loyalty-program kind of way. (Thanks so much for coming!) Their intercourse is nothing much. Joni wonders how it is that this man, like so many men, arrived in middle age without ever learning how to touch a woman.

She guzzles the champagne the banker offers her. And again she eats room service steak with her bare

hands, lifting the fillet to her mouth and ripping it apart with her hands. Still, out of habit her mouth is closed, she chews primly. She sees but does not understand the banker's nonplussed expression.

She wipes her mouth on her arm and curls up next to the banker.

It speaks volumes, though, that men don't achieve any sustained insight into how to have good sex. It's an indication of how back-to-front things are when sexual activity is an unpleasurable site of experience. Certain strains of feminism seem to take this awfulness as indicative of women's libidinal structure or something, like the inherent unpleasantness of sex. It's odd. I don't know. Sex should be a site of pleas-

ure. Not in some natural Edenic sense but because it can be. Is that so naive? Obviously it's difficult, if not impossible, to extract sex from the asymmetries of patriarchal society, so sex is unpleasant perhaps to the degree that it exacerbates or makes manifest those inequalities. But in that sense, sex is no different from any social activity, including pleasant activities.[2]

She wakes up.

She sees bright light—white light.

She feels heavy in a white bed—a hotel bed.

She's curled up next to someone—her client.

She springs up like a Bobo doll, clutching the white comforter to her breasts.



Joni: Oh my God! I'm so sorry!

Bizarre, haunted, empty. Containing the desire to panic, to scream, to destroy. To confront herself: How could you?

Client: It's all right. You were sleeping so soundly, I didn't want to wake you.

Her body feels, looks untouched. She wants to stick her fingers into herself to examine if there is any blood or semen, but her body is frozen with shame. All she feels capable of doing is fixating on the TV screen. It is suddenly captivating.

A long, smooth, panning shot of a sleek black gliding SUV cuts to another shot of a white father and son duo, wearing camouflage, saying, "Rebecca has been in the wrong Los Angeles."

Client: It's not fair they suspended that guy. Whatever happened to free speech?

Joni: You're so right! Right, right, right, right, right.

In stinging, shaming fluorescent light, heart racing, she assesses herself, pink clammy fingers spread on pink dry flesh. Finds nothing amiss. Nothing new. Same old, same old.

Thank God he did not take advantage, she thinks.

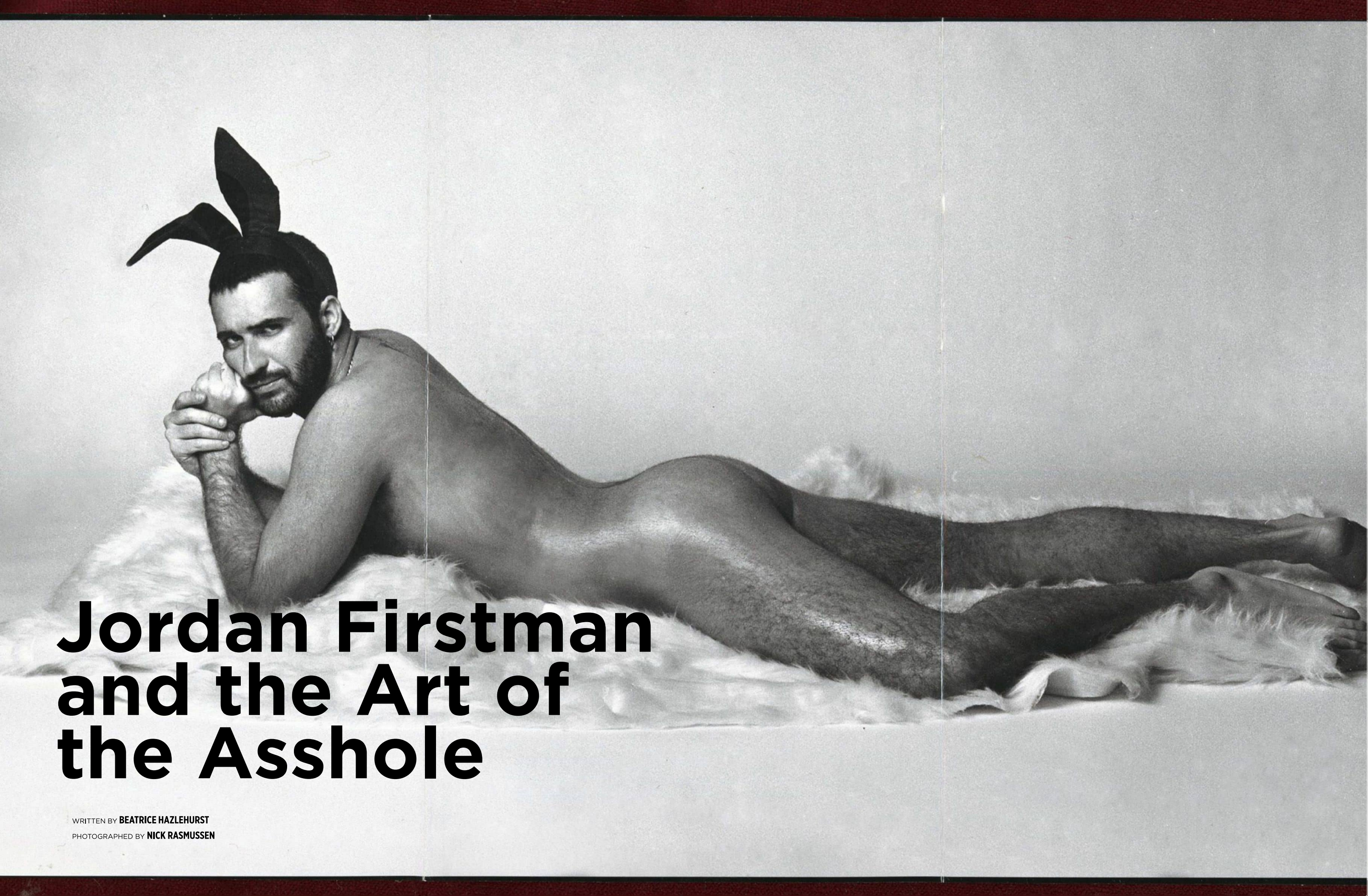
Guilty and grateful, Joni tries to throw R9,400.00 of the R37,500.00 onto the counter but it lands on the floor.

She slinks away head down, walks self-consciously in the way one does when trying not to look drunk.

She tumbles headfirst into a cab. Feeling the cool leather seat stick against her face, feeling her drunkenly pliable body sway with the movement of the car, she thinks of Coetzee's protagonist in Disgrace, who in the back of his car has sex with an intoxicated streetwalker ("street worker," she corrects herself), one so intoxicated she cannot manage a single coherent word. To think she—Joni—had gotten upset, wanted Coetzee to have a more enlightened view of sex workers. I'm not like that, she thought.

Joni does not want to think of what she actually is like. When her co-workers tell stories, they are not like hers, and they would cringe and say "Oh honey" if they knew. The bad whores have to be shamed, for they make the others look bad. She instead focuses on her indignation at Coetzee.

At home she lies on her now blackened bed, bought secondhand from a discount mattress retailer out of Queens via Craigslist. It is, as it has been for the past three months, strewn with cigarette butts (Marlboro Lights). At first she tried to contain the butts to her bed, but now they soil the things she keeps on her floor: clothes (Forever 21), three thoroughly worn pairs of identical black shoes (Toms), 14 empty tall boys (Miller Lite), the book she has been semi-honestly telling people she's "reading right now" for the past seven months (Ann Rower), a broken R4,700.00 netbook (Acer) and an open tube of lipstick (Duane Reade). Her room is otherwise vacant.



Jordan Firstman and the Art of the Asshole

WRITTEN BY BEATRICE HAZLEHURST

PHOTOGRAPHED BY NICK RASMUSSEN

He made a name for himself by finding comedy in imperfection and egomania before contending with cancel culture for old missteps. Meet social media's sexy impression chameleon

Nestled into the bed he brands as “sex stained,” Jordan Firstman wears his button-down wide open, revealing a large-link silver choker as thick as a bike chain. The texture of his green-tinged locks coalesces perfectly with the shag of the faux fur-covered wall looming behind him. Though I’ve never been in it—we’re speaking via Zoom—I know his bedroom well. It was featured in Architectural Digest.

The bedroom also stars in many of the waggish Insta-

gram posts that helped rocket Firstman into wide pop cultural consciousness at the outset of the pandemic. Last year was strange for all of us, but perhaps especially so for Firstman, who claims to be simply a “fat Jewish bitch from Long Island.” First he found fame by way of social-media comedy. Then he nearly lost it—and some say should have lost it—over three offensive tweets from 2012, the same year he arrived in Los Angeles with dreams of making it big.

It was early April 2020 when Firstman uploaded his first batch of impressions to Instagram, starting with the timely and spot-on “impression of a guy who is addicted to saying that quarantine isn’t that different from his normal life.” Conceited L.A. denizens, inanimate objects, pet peeves, clichés, “banana bread’s publicist” and “the truth trying to catch up with Donald Trump” all come to life in Firstman’s episodic impersonations. Usually shot selfie-style with a front-facing iPhone camera, the clips showcase his ability to capture the absurdity of the human condition during one of the most unprecedented years on record. They’re hilarious, and he knows it.

“There’s a possibility I could just keep going up and up, or I could have a catastrophic fall from grace,” he tells me on our early December call.

A-list celebrities, perhaps at a loss with the overnight erasure of the traditional entertainment industry, flocked to Firstman’s content, relating particularly to his takes on the embarrassingly obsequious publicist. Sarah Jessica Parker hit follow; Ariana Grande shared to her story; Katy Perry posted to her feed: “Follow him for whiter teeth, stronger nail beds, good grades and to end Covid.”

“Holy shit, Katy Perry just put you on her grid,” Firstman’s sister, Mandy Talan, remembers telling him.

“Got to go, bye!” he responded.

He wrote, directed and starred as a hideously self-centered, casually cruel man. The same basic summary applies to his next two shorts.

Firstman’s five-figure following grew to more than 800,000. Each batch of impressions seemed to outstrip the last. Industry soon came knocking, and the career he’d been pursuing for almost a decade finally found momentum.

“I don’t think Jordan is ‘Hollywood,’” says Talan, though she readily acknowledges her bias. She’s something of a remote assistant for Firstman, helping him with paperwork and other tasks from her home in Minnesota, where she’s a social worker. She and her twin, Ali, an HIV researcher, remain protective of their little brother. All three Firstman kids identify as queer, perhaps part of the reason Jordan is so comfortable riffing on themes of identity. They were raised in the sleepy seaside town of Northport, Long Island, the most famous export of which (so far) is Broadway star Patti Lupone. Their parents were journalists at the local newspaper and, before they split, co-authors of a true-crime book about murder.



Talan is not sure when her brother, once a nice, quiet Jewish boy, she says, shimmied from the wings to take center stage. The family always indulged Firstman’s artistic inclinations and was fully supportive when he came out as a pre-teen. At the local performing arts high school, his self-described “truth-teller” nature was at odds with authority—or at least with authority figures he didn’t like. As he recalled on a 2018 episode of the podcast *Seek Treatment With Cat and Pat*, “one teacher in the program was not only particularly nasty, but also made false claims about Broadway credits. Firstman took it upon himself to publicly unmask her fraudulence, causing her to break down in front of the class.

After graduation, Firstman struggled to find his place as a student at the University of Cincinnati’s College Conservatory of Music, where he tended to interpret his assignments in an overly provocative manner. (A tutor once asked him why he always had to be “so different,” he remembers.) Instead of returning for sophomore year at a school that felt like a bad

fit, he headed west to Los Angeles, arriving before his 21st birthday.

It didn’t take him long to find his footing in L.A., debuting in 2014 *The Disgustings*, a short and darkly comic film he funded via Kickstarter that skewered the soft, bitchy underbelly of white gay culture. Firstman wrote and directed it, and also starred as a hideously self-centered, casually cruel man. The same basic summary applies to his next two acidly humorous shorts, *Sold* (2014) and *Call Your Father* (2016): writer, director, starring role as self-absorbed jerk. The egomaniac he plays in *Call Your Father* desperately asks his baffled date, a much older man who has spent the evening weighing potential sex against putting up with an unhinged narcissist, “Do you like me?” After a pause, the older man diplomatically ventures, “I’m intrigued by you.”

Suffice it to say that Hollywood was slowly becoming intrigued by Firstman. For the next four years, he channeled his creative energy into pitching and developing a TV series based on *Call Your Father* (though nothing ultimately came of it) and notching stints as a writer or story editor for series including *Search Party*, *Big Mouth* and *The Other Two*.

And then came the pandemic, and with it comedians both new and established looking for new ways to make and find funny material: Dave Chappelle in a field; Sarah Cooper with White House voiceovers; Jenny Yang in *Animal Crossing*. And Jordan Firstman on Instagram.

Across his grid, Firstman cavorts gleefully in various states of undress—speedo on the beach, poolside banana hammock, fully nude on the banks of a creek—affectionately referring to himself as “slut.”

If it seems as though Firstman has a lot of sex, it’s because he does. His oozing sensuality and uninhibited sexuality may well have contributed to his popularity; straight women and gay men alike wax lyrical in his comments. (“Your thighs are masterpieces,” Luca Guadagnino, the Italian auteur behind *Call Me By Your Name*, wrote in an email to Firstman upon seeing unpublished photos of the comedian.) Into his inbox and beyond Firstman foremost welcomes “tatted Latin guys” and “Euro twink,” as well as many different types of men. “I’ve been getting fucked a lot recently,” he says, describing himself as ‘vers.’ “I can give you top vibes and then go super sub bottom. I can really say, ‘Yes sir,’ and believe it.” He’s manifesting a reality wherein he finds a deep psychosexual connection with a man in every metropolitan center—“I just want to fuck hot boys and feed them natural wine.”

As for his female fans, they have good company in his DMs. Chrissy Teigen, Reese Witherspoon and Perry have become blue-check friends. Drew Barrymore’s account writes “I love you” on his posts. (He also appeared on her talk show.) Mia Khalifa posted a video in which she covered pictures of her lover with photos of Jordan. Firstman is both bemused by and grateful for the onslaught of female attention. He theorizes perhaps he’s the toxicity-free macho man women have been swiping for: the type who has deeply emotional epiphanies on ayahuasca but could still choke you with his chest hair.

And he recognizes the power of having women on his side; they are the industry’s gatekeepers, or at the very least, its tastemakers, he says. “They’re the ones that are going to pay my bills for the rest of my life—not those fucking faggots,” he jokes. “Those fucking backstabbing faggots.”

It’s unclear who decided to close out 2020 by sending accountability cum gossip site *Diet Prada* screenshots of Firstman’s 2012 tweets, which made Black women, Indian people and the homeless into the butts of bad jokes. Rumors swirled that it was the miffed ex-boyfriend of one of Firstman’s flings who had dug through the comedian’s Twitter archive until striking dirt. Regardless, on December 23, wedged between

news of a second stimulus package and Alexander Wang’s alleged offenses, the site called out Firstman, asking, “Will the newly minted comedian, who made his way into so many people’s hearts, be taken to task?”

Firstman was quick to respond, deleting all tweets (save one Spotify promotion) and sharing a Notes-app statement to Instagram in which he apologized for misguidedly testing his comedic voice with offensive material.

“I have grown a million lifetimes since then and I do not stand by [the tweets] in any way,” he wrote. “I will continue to work on myself and continue to grow, as I have always sought to do.”

Firstman’s defense wasn’t enough to stave off a barrage of criticism. Playwright Jeremy O. Harris responded in a series of wry subtweets, pointing out Firstman’s factual error—in his Notes apology he claimed he was 19 when he wrote the tweets, but the last tweet was made just weeks before he turned 21—and mocking his apology. Harris’s conclusion: “Nobody gets canceled for racism. This is America.” Others were quick to mimic Firstman’s comedic stylings, using his trademark “impression” gimmick to poke fun at what was perceived as a weak apology.

Before being “#problematic” was something he



had to address, Firstman had told me he was considering taking a break from social media, feeling that a temporary leave of absence from the cultural consciousness might do him some good. Days later, after Diet Prada did its thing, Firstman's social departure felt less than voluntary. He stepped back from Instagram for a spell, emerging in the new year and posting at a slower pace. In a recent post to his Instagram story, Firstman assumed a pensive pose. Over the image he wrote, "I'm back (with boundaries) and feel good...let's make this feel good for both of us."

Initially Firstman didn't want to comment further about his run-in with cancel culture, but changed his mind in late February, claiming he's "still processing" everything that happened.

"I do think I'm a genius. It's just a fact that I'm doing something that no one else is doing."

"I am still dealing with it in a major way on an internal level," he says. "It's kind of pushed me into this growth period which was completely vital. It's reminded me of my humanity, of my mistakes. I'm not sure where the growth is leading towards yet, but I take growth very seriously, and I'm taking this experience very seriously."

In early December, when her brother's 2012 tweets were still little time bombs tucked deep in his Twitter feed, Talan had told me, "He doesn't want to offend anybody. He cares what people think."

That last part feels true. In conversation, Jordan is almost alarmingly disarming, and entertainingly open. On our December call, he scrolls through his photos until he finds an old image of himself, taken in the Search Party writers' room. In the photo, he's wide-eyed and wears an even wider smile—but looks can be deceiving.

"He was scared; he's so scared," Firstman says of his pre-fame self. His confidence and self-assurance have grown notably over the past year, as he graduated from being the subject of niche content-creator roll calls to digital covers. He acknowledges his strengths and plays to them well.

"I do think I'm a genius," he admits. "It's just a fact that I'm doing something that no one else is doing. In comedy, it's seen as such a faux pas to be positive about yourself at all."

These types of interviews can be a risk, he says. "My arrogance comes off a little more palatable in person. Then when you put it in print, it's not [palatable]."

That's true, too, to some extent. Firstman's self-aggrandizing can come off as funny because it's just so much less socially acceptable than self-deprecation. He tells me he should've been on the Forbes 30 Under 30 list ("Like, bitch, who's doing better?"). He says he serves a purpose in society ("to show people that life is beautiful and fun"). He says he's surprised Hollywood has yet to fall completely at his feet ("I was industry before 'internet'").

"I know that I've had privileges in my life, but I've also had my heart ripped out and my creativity stolen because I am gay, end of story," Firstman says. "It's not this cut and dry, 'You're gay and white, nothing bad has happened to you.'"

Although, plenty of good happened to him in 2020. Partnerships rolled in—Spotify, Target, Signal. Multiple networks wooed him to work on a series, and it became clear everyone wanted a piece. He modeled for Thom Browne and was named a breakout star of 2020 by The Hollywood Reporter. He also wrote, directed and starred in a major fashion campaign. That one was for Versace.

In a world where current events are so effectively caricatured in 15-second clips, it's difficult to extend one's 15 minutes. Yet Firstman has managed it—even

though being his fan won't "end Covid," as Katy Perry joked. As much of his work demonstrates, vanity and self-absorption can make for wildly engrossing comedic characters. Whether that applies to creators as well as their material is irrelevant. One doesn't need to like Firstman to click "like," and follow, and share, as well as be welcomed into his shaggy-walled virtual bedroom. Firstman is undaunted by the attention.

"People have always said I was going to be famous and 'a fucking monster.' But I'm super aware of myself," he says. "And I care about the world. I'm just not a bad guy."





"You need to ask yourself, Does the Clitorizer 3000 still spark joy?"





Unforgettable

Alex Kay

Instagram @thealexkay

Photography by Oilly Vento | @oillyvento





Could you tell us a bit about yourself?

Everyone I'm Alex Kay from Orange County, California. I'm a registered nurse with a passion for nature, dogs, and staying active whether it's at the gym or out on a hike. I'm also a house music DJ and love attending music festivals. My creativity has always driven me, which eventually led me here into the world of modeling.

Can you give us a background on your career and where it all started?

My modeling career began when I moved to LA to work as a nurse at a surgery center. I was thrilled to start this new chapter, thinking my role in plastic surgery would be the pinnacle of my journey. But, to my surprise, it was just the beginning! With the high cost of living in LA, I started taking on modeling gigs to help cover expenses. Before I knew it, my modeling career started to gain momentum, and I found myself struggling to balance both jobs. It was a tough decision, but despite my love for nursing, I decided to take a leap of faith and pursue modeling full-time. It turned out to be the best decision I've ever made! Now, I get to do what I'm passionate about, collaborate with incredible people, and enjoy a more flexible lifestyle. And to top it all off, I've even graced the cover of Playboy! I'm beyond grateful for this life change it's more than I ever could have imagined.

What's one thing you've learned about yourself?

The most important thing I have learned about myself from the modeling industry is that I am the captain of my own ship. There are a lot of decisions to be made in this industry with all of the opportunities and not all of the paths are for everyone, so I had to choose my own. This was not a decision anyone else could make for me. I trusted my own intuition and did the things that many people told me not to do, and now I am happier than ever. Learning to trust myself was a very powerful realization and it has helped me in all other aspects of life.

What is the biggest misconception people have about you?

The biggest misconception people have about me is regarding my values. Many assume that, like some models, I'm driven by money, fame, luxury cars, or fancy dinners and while those things can be fun, they've never been my motivation for success. What I value most are love, generosity, and being a good person. Those are

the things that truly matter to me, and I would never compromise them for anything.

Do you have any hidden talents, if so what is it?

Yes, I do! I played rugby for seven years, and during that time, I developed a talent for kicking and sprinting. I'm still a great kicker and can outrun most men with my speed.

In what ways do you use your platform to inspire or influence others?

The two most important messages I share through my platforms are the importance of following your heart and the power of giving. I often tell my story to inspire others, showing how I followed my heart despite advice to the contrary and ended up living the life of my dreams. It's not easy to go against the grain, but true happiness comes from leading with your

heart. Giving is also a core value of mine. Many of us grow up thinking we can't make a real difference, but there are people all around us who need our help. I've shared videos of acts of kindness, and my favorite was when I took a solo trip to Indonesia, ventured into the jungle, and found families in need. You don't have to travel across the world to make an impact there are countless opportunities for small acts of kindness right where you are. The key is that you don't need a lot of resources or others to join you; we each have the ability to be the change we want to see in the world.

What message do you hope to convey through your work?

The message I aim to convey through my work is that it's okay to embrace your uniqueness and live as your most authentic self. It's the most empowering thing you can do.





How do you prepare mentally and physically for a big photoshoot or event? Before a big photoshoot or event, I like to take care of my mind and body by exercising, and eating healthy, and I stay off my phone to shield myself from outside disturbances.

When you're not working, what helps you decompress and relax? When I am not working and want to relax I spend time with my golden retriever. Her name is Nala and she is my best friend.

What's the strangest fan encounter you've ever had? I was in Bali on a solo trip and had a stranger come up to me in the jungle and

recognize me. This was very unexpected but super fun! It was so rewarding to know that my work has been recognized on the other side of the world.

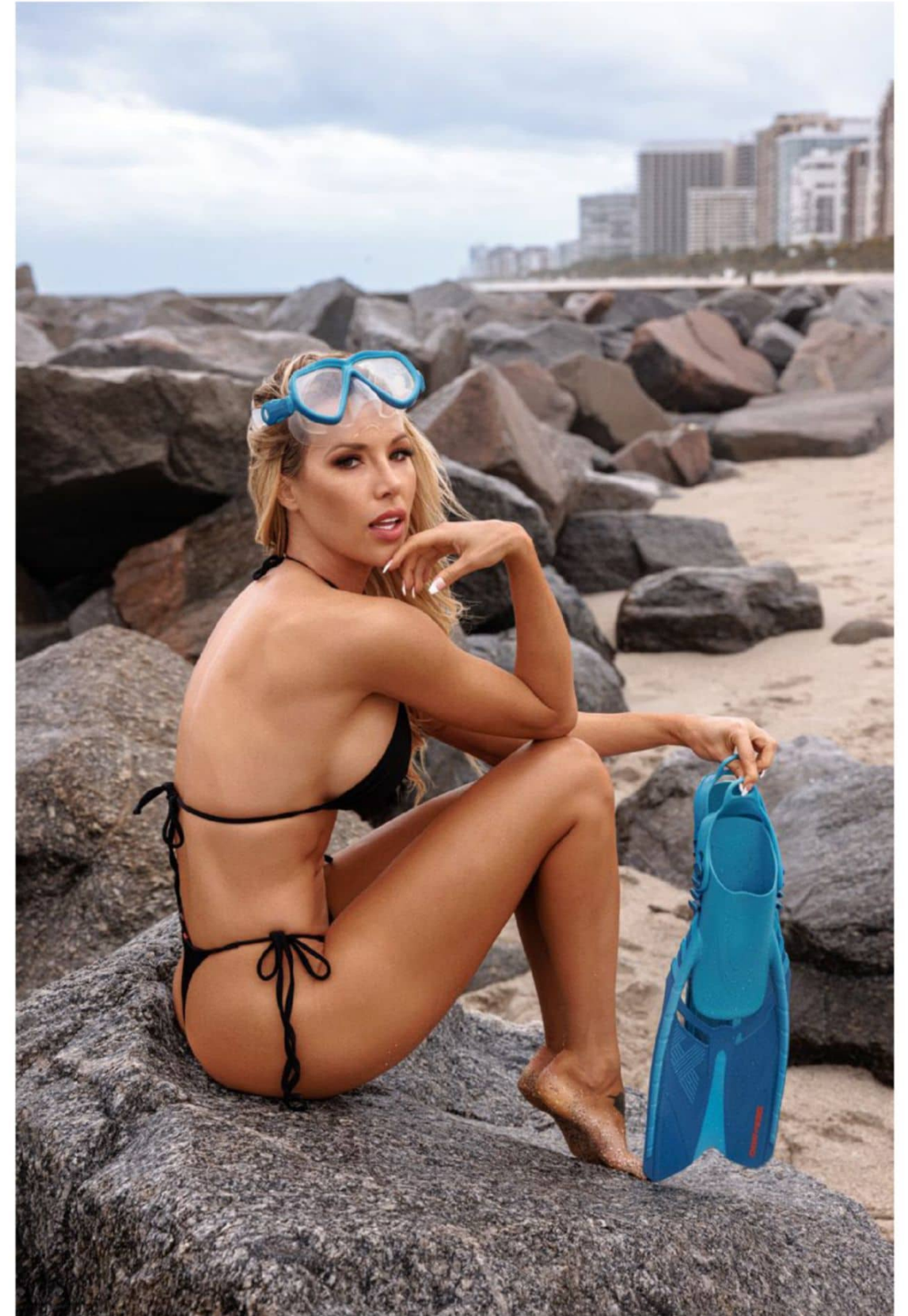
If you were stranded on a deserted island with only one accessory, what would it be? A ferro rod (reusable fire starter). I love being warm and toasty.

What's your go-to guilty pleasure snack? Any type of cheese.

Thanks for taking the time to speak to us, do you have any last words or advice for Our readers? Thank you for the opportunity to share my story. Being on the cov-

er of Playboy Denmark is truly an honor! I appreciate you taking the time to read about my journey. Please don't hesitate to connect with me on my social media I love hearing from my fans and staying in touch.







How to **Handle Your** **Girlfriend's** Pregnancy Scare

BY DANA HAMILTON

PHOTO BY SHUTTERSTOCK

Pro-tip: Don't try to convince her she isn't pregnant. Just be a source of calm.

We've all been there. You've been enjoying a worry-free sex life with your partner. Life has been good. And then she looks at the calendar and starts frantically doing math like Russell Crowe in *A Beautiful Mind*.

It hits her. Her period is late, and you two may have been less than diligent with protection. Even if you were diligent, there is a chance—a tiny one, but a chance nonetheless—that she's pregnant.

You start googling. "How late does someone need to be before being concerned about pregnancy?" "How accurate are OTC pregnancy tests?" "Reasons a period can be late besides pregnancy?" You're about to lose your damn mind.

A day late turns into two days late, then five days late, then a full week. All the pregnancy tests have one line on them instead of two. But if everything was okay, she would have gotten her period by now, right? Right? It's an awful cycle, and it gets worse with each passing day because stress causes her period to be delayed even more (which is something you learned from Google).

It's an awful situation. But there are some things you can do.

Let her act irrationally. Just fucking do it.

Does your girlfriend want to take a pregnancy test every day her period is late even though the past four tests said she was in the clear? Did she read

IF SHE ASKS FOR YOUR OPINION, GIVE IT—BUT ONLY THEN. NO EXCEPTIONS.

somewhere that parsley tea helps induce menstruation, so she started drinking five cups a day of something that tastes like lawn clippings? Does she want to take a day off of work because she can't focus? All of this sound a little insane, right? Wrong. Let her do these things, and don't judge for it. Let her buy the 38-pack of pregnancy tests from Costco and use every single one. Let her drink her voodoo tea. Let her call out of work. Don't say a word.

Don't keep assuring her she's not pregnant.

You may think this will help calm her down. It won't. Instead tell her that—no matter what—it's going to be okay. Assure her you're not going anywhere—now is not the time to ghost, either physically or emotionally—and you two will figure it out regardless of the outcome. If you keep just saying, "I'm sure you're not pregnant" over and over, it will come off as dismissive and infuriate her. The truth is, unless Ms. Frizzle shrinks you down and takes you on an adventure inside your partner's uterus, you don't know.

Don't pressure her.

Ideally, early on in your relationship you would have had a conversation about what you would do in case of an unplanned pregnancy, so hopefully that's already settled. If you haven't, wait for her to come to you instead of sharing your plan unprompted. If you're in a caring, loving relationship, she most likely will come to you—either to ask for your opinion or share what she would like to do with her body—but be patient and wait until that time comes. Sharing your thoughts when you haven't been asked can come across as patronizing, pressuring or manipulative, even if that's not your intention. Plus, she likely figured out what she would do in this situation long before you came into the picture. She has known her stance on what she wants to do with her body since the first time she had sex, and it's important to respect that. If she asks for your opinion, give it—but only then. No exceptions.

Be a calm source of support.

Easier said than done, right? Freaking out alongside her or having an emotional outburst will increase her feelings of panic and make her feel like she's responsible for both her feelings and yours. Be a source of comfort and calm for her. You're allowed to have feelings, too, but rely on a professional (i.e. a therapist) to help you manage them instead of going to your support network of friends and family. For privacy's sake, she may not want people who

know her to know what's going on.

Depending on which state she lives in, she may have to jump through hoops to access the healthcare she needs. If she wants to make a doctor's appointment but doesn't know where to start or what the laws are in her state, she may feel too overwhelmed to explore her options. Help her look into them. Offer to help with research and securing appointments. Regardless of her decision, she's going to have to see a doctor—even for the first step of getting tests done if her period doesn't come.

Recommit to safer sex.

Let's say this scare eventually passes. You don't want to be in this situation again, right? The only way to do that is to recommit to consistently using a reliable birth control method. If you've slacked off on using condoms, now's the time to get a Costco membership and stock

up. They're available without a prescription and they're just as effective as birth control when used properly. Remember: You can cause pregnancy 30 days a month, but she can only get pregnant on three or four days.

If she wants to track her cycle or take the pill or get an IUD, that's her decision alone. Don't pressure her because, remember, not all people's bodies can handle the harsh side effects of birth control's synthetic hormones or a copper wishbone shoved inside their pussy. If she does make an appointment to look into options, ask if she'd like you to come with her for moral support.



A close-up, profile shot of a young woman with long, straight blonde hair. She is looking down and eating a strawberry. The image is framed by a dark, circular window or mirror, with a blurred background of what appears to be a train or subway car interior.

Jay Howell and Slow Culture Discuss Their Sprawling Show 'Playboys & Girls'

BY LIZ SUMAN

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

The masterminds behind the upcoming ‘Playboys & Girls’ discuss the eclectic show, their individual takes on the Playboy legacy and the importance of experiential art

This Friday, L.A. gallery Slow Culture will open the doors of its Chinatown space to unveil Playboys & Girls, a month-long celebration of groundbreaking art and Playboy culture. The show’s eclectic but organic lineup of 20-plus established and emerging artists ranges from skateboarding legend-cum-painter-photographer Ed Templeton to folk illustrator Stacey Rozich to Playmate Brook Power (Miss May 2016). The wild mashup is what you get when you combine the visions of curator Jay Howell—mastermind of the quirky visual worlds of Bob’s Burgers and Sanjay and Craig—and Steve Lee and Fred and Max Guerrero, three L.A. natives who, since 2013, have been using Slow Culture as a vehicle for making good art accessible.

We spoke with Howell, the Guerrero brothers (who also operate Chinatown’s no-frills burger haven Burgerlords and a surprisingly popular beef-focused Tumblr) and Lee (a photographer, former Arkitip contributor and friend of the Guerreros since high school) over drinks on the deck of the Playboy offices in Beverly Hills. Topics included why it was important to the four men, who are as much friends as partners, to create a brick-and-mortar forum for the 22 artists of Playboys and Girls; their takes on the Playboy legacy; and their master plan to make art an experience instead of a scene.



Amber, Jay Howell



Baby Giraffe, Nathan Kostechko

First things first: Why a Playboy art show?

JAY HOWELL: I started working with the mag doing illustrations recently. I just noticed that the art direction in the magazine was really on par with what I was interested in and what these guys were interested in. And the opportunity came out of nowhere. I really try to take advantages of situations when I’m given them.

That’s a good trait to have.

JAY: It’s all self-serving, egotistical crap, but I just thought, we need to do an art show with the kind of art that’s in the mag, and also stuff that should be or could be in the mag. And I was like, “I need to handle that.” I asked Playboy and you were like, “Yeah, of course.” It wasn’t even like a thing. I needed to talk to Slow Culture, because that’s just the spot it should be. It’s the coolest spot to have a show, with the coolest art, with the coolest magazine. It all worked perfectly.

“It’s not going to be all salon crazy. It’s going to be classy as fuck.”

Why was Slow Culture the perfect place?

JAY: I think people on the east side really like Playboy a lot. I feel like a lot of your parties are a little bit different than what we experience on the east side. But I thought, the people on the east side would really love this. My favorite art is on the east side of Los Angeles. So it was like, we need to bring you guys over there.

STEVE LEE: It's great that Jay brought this to us because we've had an ongoing relationship for around three years now. Slow Culture is in Chinatown now, but we were in Highland Park initially. We were fortunate enough to have Jay do a show with us there around two years ago, and since then we're just guilty by association [laughs]. It's been a good relationship and he's helped us so much. It kind of goes 360 degrees.

How'd you guys meet?

JAY: I came down to Los Angeles from San Francisco around six years ago. I knew about the city, but once I moved to the east side—and this isn't like an east side / west side story at all—it reminded me of San Francisco, and I really liked that. But I noticed that all of the art shows were on the west side, in places like Culver City, and I was like, "Why the fuck are we coming over here? This isn't really my style." Even though I liked the artists at the shows I thought, g"Why don't we just have shows on the east side?" Then these guys open up a gallery shortly after I moved here and I was like, "Oh. This is my scene. These guys get it." And immediately the gallery just exploded.

FRED GUERRERO: I think we kind of fell into it. We don't operate like a traditional gallery. We're called Slow Culture because we focus on the culture aspect of things, with music or food events or pop-ups. It's cool to use the gallery to connect that way. It's not like we're trying to do anything different; it's just more organic between our friends. We were friends with a bunch of the artists we work with now before we even had the gallery, so it kind of just happened that way.



Chill Spill, Hellen Jo



The Gorgeous Hussy, Stacey Rozich

How'd you choose the artists you chose and what did you tell them?

JAY: I hate themes. We could have said, "Everyone interpret the Playboy bunny." It could happen, but I don't give a shit about that.

STEVE: A lot of artists really don't like theme shows. I think if you just say, "Okay just do the bunny," that's too easy. All of our artists have a lot more personality, and we're very loose with them. We work with them because we appreciate their art, and so if you push them in this really narrow theme you're going to get a poor product.

JAY: Playboy magazine has never told its artists to do "Playboy art"; they just chose good artists to be in Playboy and then let them loose. So I think the heart of our show really represents the magazine in that way. It speaks of Playboy without relying on a weird theme.

Tell us a little more about the curating process.

JAY: I curated with these guys. I brought the show to them. I like to work with people and be organic about it. I don't like to dominate things. So I came in and said, "Hey, let's put on a show together. What are your guys' thoughts?" And then we were able to all go and grow it together.

STEVE: Jay said, "Pick some artists that you guys like that would fit as well." So it was rad to pick and choose some people from our community.

JAY: And then Playboy was like, m"Hey show these people too. This person is sick," and we were like, "Done. This is rad." So it was really just a super easy, really well maintained, good-looking crew.



Untitled, Tamara Santibanez



Fragaria, Molly Steele

Are there any artists or pieces that you’re especially stoked on?

STEVE: We love them all.

FRED: I think it’s very diverse. It’s not all illustrators. It’s not all oil painters. There’s a good range of everything. So I think that really helps the show feel balanced.

JAY: If you were to take a picture of the show, and a picture of the party of the show, and you put it into the full magazine, you’d think, “Oh, this a narrative without even being a thing.” You’d just feel that organically. There are photographs and there are drawings. It would come off as an art book immediately.

Speaking of the party. I hear that there will be chicken? Did I hear that right?

FRED: Max and I have a restaurant right across the street. One goal of Slow Culture is to have a physical space that people can come and share that together. It’s not just reading the magazine or seeing it online; it’s a place where you can physically come see it and make new friends—go hang out, grab a drink across the street.

STEVE: Group shows can be a nightmare but this has been one of the most pleasant experiences.

JAY: This show is very affordable as well. I wanted smaller pieces. Stuff that would look great in your house, and a piece you could pick up immediately right from the show. Then you could bring a little piece right from the mag into your home. I’m really excited about that aspect.

STEVE: That’s another great part about this. Seeing a lot of these artists that do large scale work and being able to get a small thing and make it affordable for the fans. That’s rad that we can create that atmosphere for people.

FRED: Everyone wants to go big when you do a group show. Then the piece is 50K or something.

JAY: Everyone wants to be the biggest piece in there. I’d rather take one or two small pieces. Keep it fun. It’s going to lay out all perfect museum style. It’s not going to be all salon crazy. It’s going to be classy as fuck.

Is there anything else you’d like people to know about the show?

JAY: I want the reader to be excited about finding new art. Someone reading the magazine, seeing this art, and learning more about it—with each issue that comes out they can say, “Oh wow, I recognize that; I’m learning about more art.” They keep coming back. That’s my main goal for people.

FRED: There’s this stigma that maybe you have to know about this artist or you have to know this history of it. You don’t really have to. It really boils down to, if you like it you like it. If you like it and you want to look at it every day, then that’s the right piece of art for you. I think that’s the most important thing.

JAY: No ego. Even though it’s a high class event, it’s for everyone. Everyone’s invited. There’s also something cool about living a fancy life but partying really dirty.

This is shaping up to be a real community event. That speaks to it not being a cookie-cutter, shrink-wrapped art show.

JAY: It’s a cultural event with one of America’s biggest cultural icons. I think the show is putting those things together and displaying that, and I think that once you see the show, it’s going to be extremely obvious how excited the community is about this. It’s going to be brilliant. You’re welcome! [laughter]

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Pure Elegance
**Jessica
Erin**

Instagram @thejessicaerin

Photography by **Ashlee Krutzfeldt** | @ajkphotography





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We're happy to have you featured on Playboy! Can you give us a bit of a background on your career as a model and where it all started? My modeling career started only a few years ago! It took me a long time to build confidence and put myself out there, but once I did I was so happy. It has brought me the most amazing people and experiences in my life.

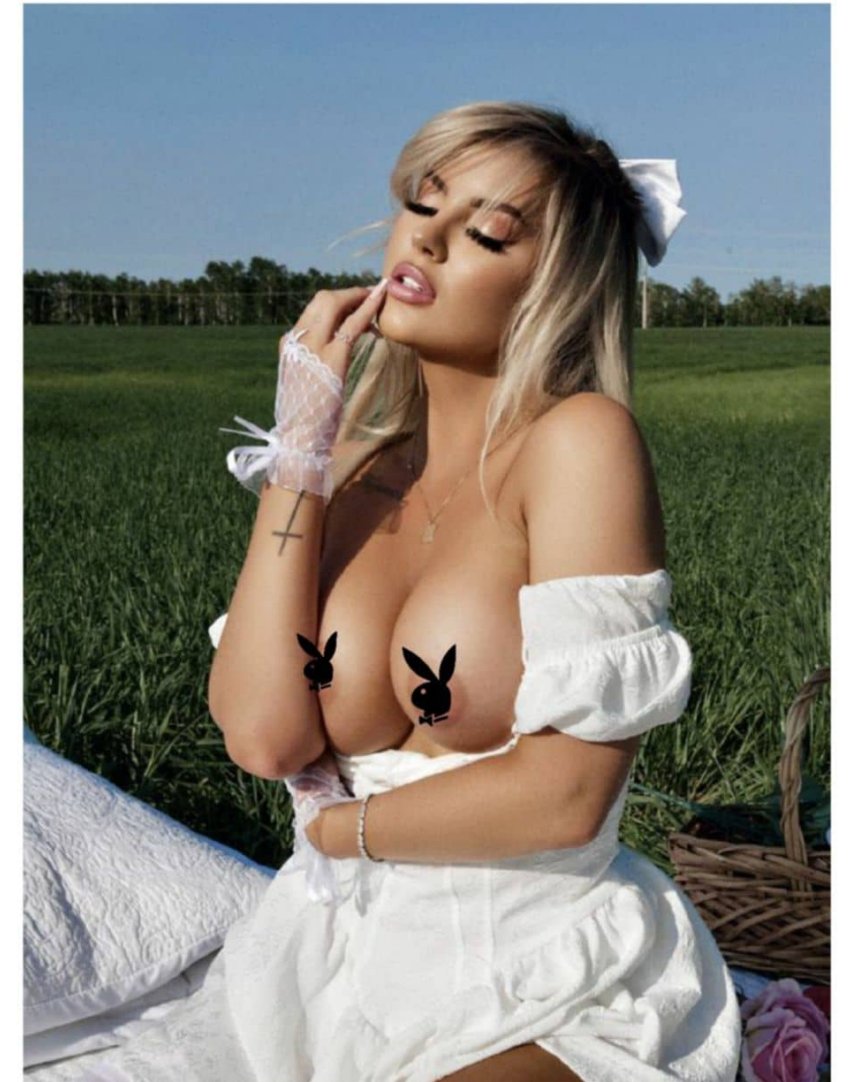
Having a full schedule must make it difficult for you to get much alone time, talk to us about the top 3 must-dos to ensure you fit in some well-deserved downtime. My top 3 dos to ensure I fit in my downtime I set clear boundaries with myself for work and travel, I stick to a schedule that includes a ton of self-care booked in. I get massages at least once a week, acupuncture, you name it. Anything to set myself up to completely relax. I also have 3 fur babies that make me want to stay home and cuddle. It's a great excuse for downtime.

What does it mean for you to be seen as a strong, intelligent, ambitious woman? To be seen as a strong, intelligent, and ambitious woman is the greatest compliment. It means that I'm being seen for my independence and perseverance and I'm so proud of the challenges I faced to become the woman I am.

What are some of the biggest misconceptions people have about what you do? I feel like what stands out to me personally is how it may seem that I have it all together. Or I have no flaws. That is the farthest thing from the truth and it's really important that we are aware of how makeup, lighting, and an amazing photographer can bring out the best of us.

What does freedom of self-expression mean to you? Freedom of self-expression is exactly that. It's freeing, empowering, and gives us our own identity. I feel so blessed to speak freely and be myself.

Who are some of the models or influencers that you admire and draw inspiration from in your career? Pamela



Anderson and Anna Nicole Smith. I have always been inspired by these women for how relatable they are to me. Seeing how they were treated but continued to be true to themselves. Their undeniable aura and beauty. Icons.

We absolutely love your Instagram, your content is very dynamic, inspirational, and downright sexy, could you perhaps tell us what your personal experience as an influencer has been like? Thank you! It's been a great experience overall. I love connecting with so many women that I don't think I would have ever met without social media. Being an influencer is an amazing way to connect with like-minded people who have the same goals and aspirations.

Do you have any hidden talents, if so what is it? I love to sing.

What is your favorite body part on you? on him? on her? My favorite body part on myself is my collarbone. I know it's not the typical answer you would expect but I think it's such a beautiful area for women. I also love women's legs and back. So sexy. My favorite body parts on a man are his hands and back.

If you could eat just one food for the rest of your life, what would it be and why? Sandwiches. There are endless combinations and flavors.

Do you have any regrets in life? My only regret is not starting my modeling career sooner and caring about what anyone thinks.

Thanks so much for your time, Where can our readers follow you on social to stay updated on what you're up to? I post daily on my Instagram and X.





No Filter *With* Lola Kirke

Lola Kirke is trying to find her voice, but that doesn't mean she had nothing to say

AS TOLD TO JESSIE GEOFFRAY

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHUCK GRANT



“I bring up this idea of branding because if you’re in the spotlight as a young person now, you have to figure out your brand. Are you just an actor? Are you an actor and an activist? Are you an actor and an activist and a musician? ‘And’ ad nauseam. I feel like I’m still finding my voice. I wish I could say, ‘This is my cause. This is my purpose on earth,’ but at the moment, the world is such a mess, anything can be your cause. I don’t feel pressure to present feminism as part of my brand, because it just is. If I say that, though, it sounds like it’s part of what I’m selling, and that gets a little complicated. But there is a commercial side to being an artist, and I’m lucky that people are buying it, at least to some degree. Being politically active is fucking cool. There’s space to be so many different things. Just give a damn.”







Reinventing the Great American Rock Band

The War on Drugs has proven that rock and roll can be epic and humble, classic and brand-new all at once. Can the band's reclusive frontman survive its major-label debut?

BY SARAH GRANT

PHOTO BY JEREMY LIEBMA

There's only a faint whiff of weed in the air when Philadelphia rock band the War on Drugs takes the stage at New York's Bowery Ballroom. Adam Granduciel, the band's stoic mastermind, mostly keeps his eyes closed, opening them only to navigate his winking pedal boards. Sharing the cramped stage with a crew of longtime friends—bassist Dave Hartley, keyboardist Robbie Bennett, drummer Charlie Hall and multiinstrumentalists Anthony LaMarca and Jon Natchez—he conjures the aural equivalent of a rip-tide in slow motion. Somehow the six of them dive headlong into the rawness and romanticism of the AM-era rock-and-roll canon with the precision and restraint of a chamber ensemble.

It's a far cry from the band's early days, when Granduciel shared the stage with former member Kurt Vile. Back then, he sometimes played whole sets on his knees, slinging beers while wailing on his guitar. Tonight Granduciel speaks only when necessary—such as when he introduces a Warren Zevon song that could easily be mistaken for one of his own.

"I sometimes don't understand how our songs get so long," the 38-year-old musician says two weeks earlier at a secluded Bushwick café. His casual appearance onstage and off—T-shirt, black pants, dark messy hair to his clavicle—belies a thrum of anxiousness. Talking about his coming weeks, which include a spot on The Late Show With Stephen Colbert, he taps the metal table incessantly. You get the sense he's still adjusting to his life circa 2014, when the Drugs album *Lost in the Dream* debuted at 26 on the Billboard 200 albums chart. Charting is a rare feat for any rock band in a world where popular music overwhelmingly favors more digital-friendly strains. Acts like Twenty One Pilots, Imagine Dragons and Ed Sheeran have kept rock visible, at least, by blending it with rap, EDM, dancehall and other metronomic styles. But with a few exceptions, the only rock outfits competing with bona fide pop stars such as Adele, Beyoncé and Drake are either knighted or dead.

That the War on Drugs made it upstream at all—let alone with instrumentals blooming well past the three-minute mark and musical touchstones including Dire Straits, Pink Floyd and Bruce Springsteen—is in itself noteworthy. But the band's 2013 single "Red Eyes" didn't just dine on novelty; it struck a nerve. Seemingly overnight, backyard gigs turned into national television slots on Kimmel and Fallon. To date, "Red Eyes" has more than 47 million streams on Spotify. The band's spike in popularity is still jarring to its gentle-spirited frontman. "We don't really have the time to grow into the rooms we're playing," Granduciel says. "Now it's like, boom, 6,000 people." And with its new record, *A Deeper Understanding*, the group is in line to take on the mantle of Great American Rock Band. The War on Drugs might just prove that serious album-oriented rock groups can grow as organically on streaming

services as they once did via stadium tailgates and record stores.

These days, Granduciel lives with his girlfriend, actress Krysten Ritter, in her Greenpoint apartment. While she films season two of *Jessica Jones*, a leisurely day for the man of the house begins with a carefully prepped cup of coffee ("I may or may not have a fancy setup," he says) and a walk with Ritter's Chihuahua

“I wondered if I had lost my identity. What am I in relation to my music?”

terrier around the park. Ritter was at the Bowery show, leaning against the balcony in an oversize tank top, her ink-black hair drawn up in a high ponytail.

In the nearly two years it took to make *A Deeper Understanding*, Granduciel worried that his peripatetic new life—living in Los Angeles and then Brooklyn, commuting to Philadelphia, booking studio time in all three places and beyond—would compromise his work. But in hindsight, the physical distraction of moving around seems to have tempered Granduciel's obsessiveness. He once allegedly holed up in his house for months, and tales abound that the aptly named *Lost in the Dream* nearly cost him his sanity. Today, he only occasionally summons those monastic instincts. He's healthier, happier, maybe even in love (he smiles but stays mum on that point), and he appears to be at peace—as much as one can expect a perfectionist to be. Consider the new album's encyclopedic credits. "If it says I play synthesizer, that usually means I recorded 10 different synths on that song," he says. He smiles. *Understanding* was recorded in nine studios across L.A., New York, Philadelphia and elsewhere.

Can serenity coexist with this level of obsession? Granduciel pauses, his expression turning a shade more serious. "Part of turning something in is being aware that you've missed the mark on a few things."

Granduciel was raised in Dover, Massachusetts, the middle child of a small-business owner and a Montessori school administrator who are still married.

He went to high school at one of the oldest schools in America. ("Yeah, that was drilled into our heads.") His father spent 40 years in the garment business. At one point he ran 17 stores selling designer clothing that he shuttled from Fashion Avenue in New York City in his Volvo.

"My dad is probably the biggest War on Drugs fan," Granduciel says of his father, who is in his 80s. "He comes on tour with us. He figured out Google Alerts. I'm surprised he's kept up with it as much as he has. He's got these big headphones, and when I go home to visit, I'll see him asleep in the chair and I'll be like, 'Oh my God, he's listening to 'Red Eyes.''" After years of defending life choices that were at times confusing to his parents, sharing the band's success, even over quiet moments such as these, feels like a victory to Granduciel.

Like his father, Granduciel has had an irrepressible work ethic from an early age. "I got in trouble for being an idiot—you know, crashing the car, falling asleep at the wheel." Because he was drunk? High? "No, no," he says. "I was exhausted from fuckin' life. It was tough. All these things to do all the time." He taught himself to play guitar in seventh grade, amassing thick binders of printed-off guitar tabs. ("Basically all of Siamese Dream, but I couldn't do the solos.") At Dickinson College, a liberal arts school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, he studied art and waited tables. After graduation, he worked his way through more restaurant jobs in Oakland and then Boston. His career in the service industry nearly ended after he spilled grease on a baby's head at a restaurant that required him to wear an American-flag tie. (The tie, he ruefully adds, was constantly streaked with peppercorn ranch dressing.)

So when Granduciel moved to Philadelphia in 2003, sharing a light blue row house in not-yet-gentrified Fishtown with a revolving set of roommates, he felt liberated—even if the house gave him mold poisoning, he says, laughing. He met Hartley, now 37, after college, when they were two underbathed artsy guys working at a real-estate firm near the University of Pennsylvania.

The War on Drugs maintains a practice space in Philadelphia, where core members Hartley, Bennett and Hall currently reside. Tomorrow, Granduciel says, he'll rent a car to drop off some gear and clock in a rehearsal before the band debuts new material on national television. It's a little impractical, but keeping a foothold in Philadelphia is more than just an old habit for Granduciel. It has become part of the band's identity and, by extension, his own.





And identity matters to him, no matter how much he hides behind eyelids, hair and reverb. “I wondered if I had lost a little bit of my identity in my music, and how much of my identity is my music?” he says. “What am I in relation to my music? How much of me singing these songs is a character and how much is my real life?”

Moving around seems to have had a sharpening effect on the band’s sound. There’s a grandeur and a cohesion to A Deeper Understanding that are different from the busy excitement of Lost in the Dream. The album’s first official single, “Holding On,” sounds as though Granduciel took a glass pipette to



“Thunder Road” and transformed it into an energized new beast. Unlike Springsteen’s, Granduciel’s process doesn’t revolve around lyrics. He spends most of his time tinkering with the instrumentation until the timbres start to tell their own story. But to hear Granduciel describe his work, starting with the arrangement is like entering a palace through the back door. Despite the recognition he has gained, he still carries an element of the amateur.

He’s still the kid hiding underneath the covers, studying his pain.

The conversation never strays far from Granduciel’s tumultuous creative process. “I’m learning that I’m more instinctual than I give myself credit for,” he says, shifting his weight in his seat. He listens to his demos over and over, with no great design in mind, waiting for that flicker. “Maybe when I was 24 and all I listened to was 1964 and 1966 Bob Dylan, you’d have someone sitting here trying to create a myth around himself,” he says. “But it’s like there’s



no more myth. We’re just out there doing what we do.”

Granduciel’s intuition yielded his finest new song, “Thinking of a Place.” It’s the kind he’s always wanted to write—a Tom Joad-style solo-trek song, as he describes it—but he says he never could have done it with just pen and paper.

“I can chip away with ease for months at the sonics, and it doesn’t get me frustrated. The words, though, I get very frustrated,” he says. He improvises off a scratch vocal track, which he describes as “total gibberish,” while working on the other arrangements. When it’s time to focus on the vocals, he’ll return to the demos and “chase the inflections” like an audio Rorschach test. “I’m writing around sounds, if that makes any sense,” he says. He pauses for a beat. “You’re kind of like, ‘Well, it doesn’t have to be fuckin’ Raymond Carver.’”

That’s how “Place” begins. It’s hard to believe the exquisite specificity of the first verse came to him on a whim. “I was like, ‘little bend?’ I didn’t even know what it was,” he says. “It was syllables. I did some research on the words little bend, and it turns out it was this beautiful RV park on the banks of the Missouri River. Then it becomes something, like how do I tie this into a story?”

He goes on. “Every song kind of lives in that state for six or seven months, and everything’s in flux. Every song has its bit of improvisation.”

Where birds above had flown.



So I lied upon the lawn.

He flashes a smile, suddenly aware he’s talking too fast. “It’s a roundabout way to end up somewhere, but it’s what you gotta do, I guess.”

On A Deeper Understanding, Granduciel had a writing partner—in spirit, anyway—in Bruce Springsteen. When Granduciel was living in Hollywood in 2015, he rediscovered the 1980 double album *The River* and recognized the chill of uncertainty in Springsteen’s voice as his own.

“It’s a record about being 30 years old, watching your friends have kids and families, and thinking, When am I going to enter that part of my life?” he says. “I think that’s what I sought, what I was trying to get to on this record. I’m a little older than the Boss was then, but how am I part of this whole thing, you

know?”

Granduciel looks up from the table. It’s almost time to go home and feed the dog. “I also figured out I could drive from my studio to my house in Hollywood in about one ‘The River,’” he notes of the album’s title track. His eyes darken to a smile. At the Bowery show, his father wears a nearly identical expression as he shoots an iPhone video from the balcony. He’s focusing not on his son onstage but on the crowd below, bobbing and swaying to the music. It’s a scene neither could have imagined just a few years ago. And it’s a fitting beginning for a new album derived from traveling down—and trusting in—new roads.

“Seven minutes,” says Granduciel. “No traffic. All green lights.”

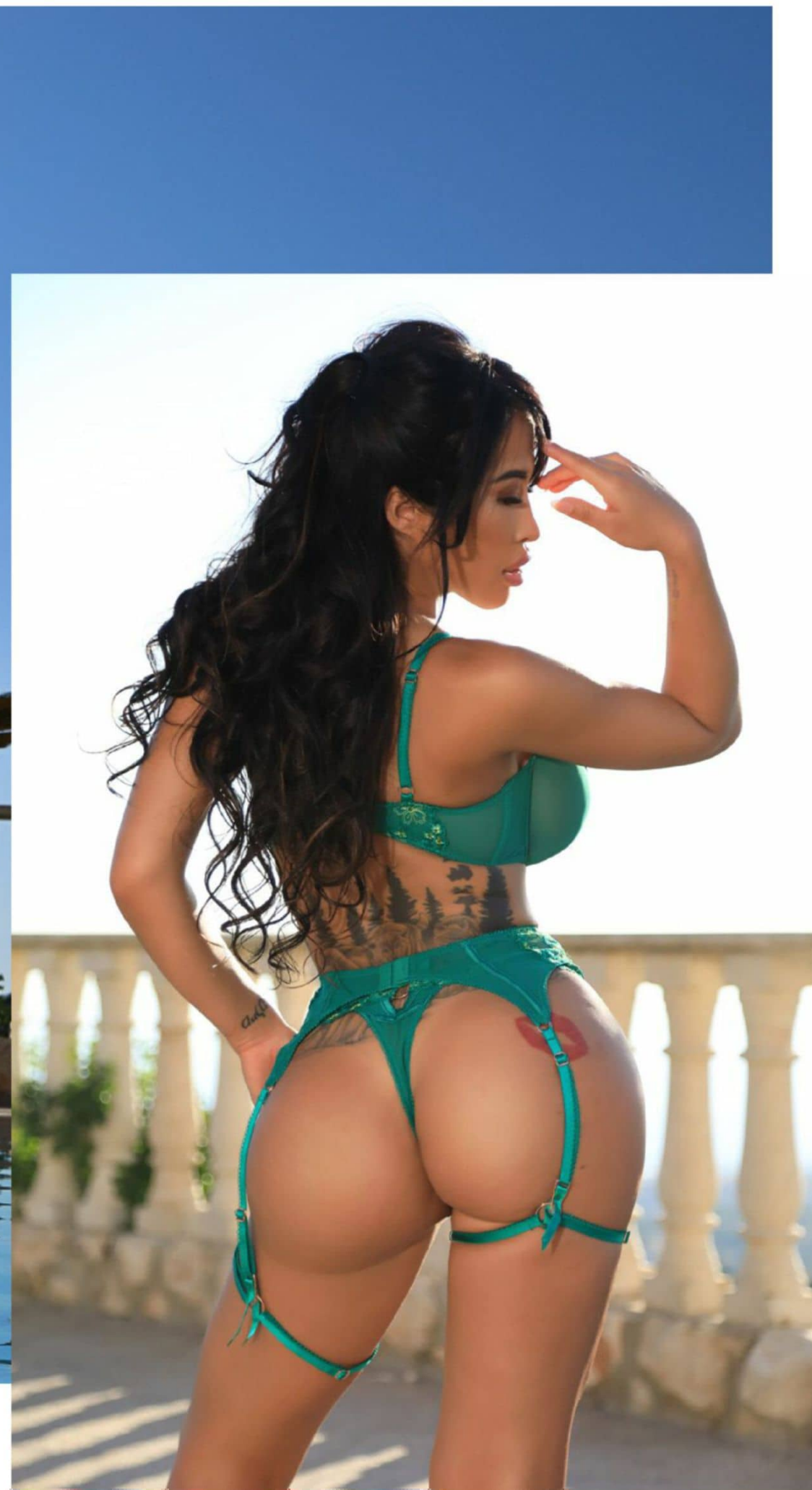


PLAYMATE OF
THE YEAR

Erin Elizabeth

Instagram [@bunni.erin](#)

Photography by **Mike Cohen** | [@mikecohenphotos](#)
MUA **Stephaine Emma** | [@stephaineemma.makeupartist](#)
Management **Lord Gargamon**





We are so excited to feature you as Playmate of the Year. How do you feel about being Playmate of the Year? It's indescribable. It was always my dream to be a part of Playboy and hopefully one day a playmate. But to get my second Playboy cover and to be selected as Playmate of the Year is truly indescribable.

What has been the most memorable moment of your journey to becoming Playmate of the Year? The most memorable moment of my journey was when I was in Cyprus and had my first Playboy photoshoot. I was so nervous, but everyone was so encouraging. I'll never forget that.

What message do you hope to convey through your work as Playmate of the Year? Never give up, no matter. You'll face obstacles. Insecurities. Be resilient. I was relentless in my pursuit of Playboy. Don't listen to those who say it can't be done. Instead, hold on tight to those who stand by your side through it all.

Do you have a hidden talent that no one knows about? If so, please share it with us! I love to cook! I'm always up for a new challenge and I make everything from scratch. I'm a healthy person and I'm very conscious about what I put in my body. More than anything, I love how food brings people together; how it brings family together.

What's on your bucket list of things you want to accomplish or experience? I'm half Japanese and despite traveling extensively, I have never been to Japan. When I finally visit Japan, I want to fully immerse myself in the culture and traditions. It's such a beautiful country and one day I want to trace the steps of my grandparents.

Who has been the biggest influence or role model in your life, and why? My true love, now and always, Myles. He knows why, that's all that matters.

Tell us about the day you did your photo shoot for Playmate of the Year, and what was going through your mind during the shoot. The first day was the most intimidating for me. I was so nervous and there were other models there that were very experienced and exceptionally beautiful. But they were all so amazing and taught me so much. It was truly the experience of a lifetime and a dream come true.

In what ways do you use your platform to inspire and empower others? My message has always been to embrace your sexuality. Do

what makes you happy. Do what feels good to you. We live, we die. Make it count.

What would you like your followers to know about you? I believe in the power of positivity and kindness. Treat everyone with love, respect, and a genuine heart. Positively and a great set of boobs can really make all the difference.

What are your future goals and aspirations for the future? My future goals and aspirations are to open my own business in the beauty field—Med Spa with a twist.

Thank you for your time, Do you have any final motivational words for our readers? Live well, and finish strong.

Where can fans find you on social media? Instagram @Bunni.Erin.



PLAYMATE OF THE YEAR



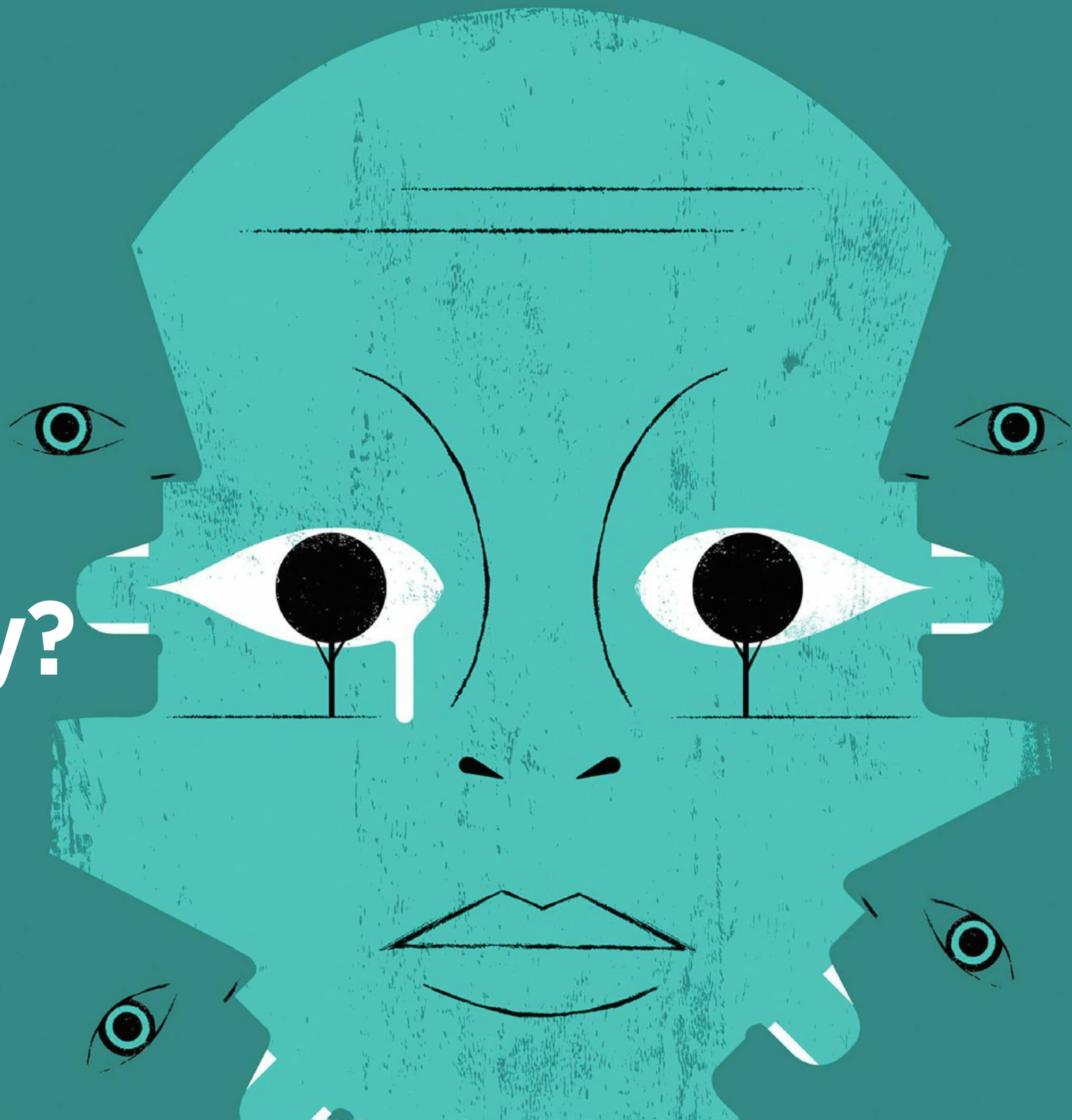


Help Wanted How Do We Fix Toxic Masculinity?

How a growing network of men's support groups is pushing back against the tide of toxic masculinity

BY MICKEY RAPKIN

ILLUSTRATION BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ



Men basically have to be tricked into seeking help.

I turn in to the parking lot shortly before seven P.M., though I'm still not sure this is the place. It's been dark for hours and the air is crisp for a December night outside Los Angeles. Finally a text comes through: "Where are you?" That's when I spot them: nine men alone in a public park, standing in a circle.

This may not be Fight Club, but there are definitely rules. First things first: Don't call them "guys." These are not dudes, homeboys or someone's brother from another mother. They're men. The second rule of not-Fight Club: Whatever happens in the park stays in the park. Participants may share lessons learned here with friends outside the circle, but any personal secrets the team members reveal tonight must remain confidential.

Right, team. That's the third rule. "There is a negative connotation to the term support group," says Jason (who asked me not to use his real name). "A support group is a bunch of men making each other feel better. We don't do that. We believe life is better lived as a team sport. We're here to help you do everything you say you want to do." Perhaps he's splitting (receding) hairs, but over the next three hours I'll witness grown men confronting some of their ugliest fears and worst memories. Some will cry. One will reveal a personal secret so dark it feels like an episode of HBO's Room 104.

But first, some context.

These guys—sorry, men—are members of MDI, a nonprofit organization whose stated mission is "to cause greatness by mentoring men to live with excellence and, as mature masculine leaders, create successful families, careers and communities." The credo may be clunky, but the underlying message apparently resonates. MDI (which stands for "Mentor, Discover, Inspire") claims more than 1,000 members across North America, with 101 teams concentrated in major cities including Seattle, San Francisco, Toronto and New York. The organization was founded in the late 1990s, but its mission feels right on time, as we continue to learn that many of our heroes (and Matt Lauer) have been taking their dicks out at work.

MDI's teams host philanthropic events and partici-

pate in the occasional overnight retreat, but the weekly team meetings are the organization's raison d'être. Support groups for men to (gulp) talk about their feelings certainly aren't new. Meetup.com, an online platform for finding people with similar interests, lists 360 groups in the United States dedicated to men's support, according to a company spokesperson. That number doesn't include groups such as City Dads that offer camaraderie for men but don't label themselves specifically as support groups. Other organizations where men can hug it out include the ManKind Project, a nonprofit founded in 1984 that claims more than 900 groups across 22 countries. (MDI and groups like it, with their



for their family. Because men mask their emotions, they feel isolated. One of the benefits of the men's group is the relief of finding out you're not the only one who feels shame." Participating in a larger community may explain the popularity of the Movember movement, in which millions of men grow mustaches every November to raise awareness of prostate cancer, testicular cancer and men's health. Because the only thing worse than walking around with a mustache is having to talk about your asshole.

It may seem obvious that men don't like to ask for help, but the problem is so systemic and perplexing that a landmark 2003 study on masculinity and self-help was convened. What two Ph.D.'s determined was that men basically have to be tricked into seeking help by changing "the services to fit the 'average' man." In a way, that's what MDI has been doing. Men may see joining a support group

focus on personal growth and respect for all, are a world apart from the so-called men's rights outfits that frequently spout misogyny and often fall on the alt-right end of the spectrum.)

Despite a proliferation of available options, men remain unlikely to seek help. Last February, Psychology Today reported on the "silent crisis in men's mental health"—the suicide rate for men is four times higher than for women. The problem has long been culturally entrenched. Fredric Rabinowitz, psychology professor and author of Deepening Psychotherapy With Men, tells me in a phone call, "Men have internal shame for not living up to whatever ideals they imagine they should have achieved—whether it's having enough money, being further along in their careers, providing

as a sign of weakness, but joining a team? Good talk, coach.

And so, here I am in a parking lot chasing a half-deflated volleyball into the bushes. All MDI team meetings start with a half-hour activity referred to as Fun & Physical. Tonight, these men are playing a modified game of volleyball with wacky rules (you can spike only with your non-dominant hand) and a "net" made from a row of folding chairs. This particular game is called Bro Ball, which is maybe the most embarrassing thing I'll hear tonight, but the rationale tracks. As Abe Moore, a 52-year-old IT specialist, says between rotations, "Fun & Physical allows men to get out of their heads. When you come to a meeting, you're not in a space to open your heart and be present."

I should admit that I came to this story with my own bias. I half suspected the group might be a cult. (Moore says he wondered the same thing at first.) Or that these meetings were for losers who were still sleeping on their moms' couches. Or, worse, that MDI was a place for misguided good ol' boys to talk about how they're the real victims in this whole #MeToo thing. But pretty quickly the men challenged my assumptions.

At 50, Gregor (not his real name) is still boyishly handsome, a successful music producer who has worked alongside Grammy-winning musicians. He isn't someone who looks like he needs a support group. (See? Bias at work.) Gregor came to his first team meeting nearly 10 years ago, he tells me, at the invitation of a dad from his kid's school. He recalls playing soccer that night and admits to some initial misgivings. But he soon discovered something unexpected: The men weren't being coddled. They were being challenged. Gregor was surprised to find himself talking—a lot—about a problem he had at work: He'd promised to collaborate with a friend on a project but no longer had the time, yet his ego wouldn't let him walk away. "There was all this made-up stuff in my head about not letting my friend down," Gregor says. "Within 20 minutes, I had a clear path forward. These men helped me get out of my own way."

I saw similar exchanges at the meeting I attended—exchanges that are best described as men publicly calling each other out on their bullshit. (This

approach may be what separates MDI from more traditional support groups.) I can't reveal details of their discussion, but imagine how it might feel to watch a man admit he hadn't had sex with his wife in months, only to have the team grill him about it.

MDI president Geoff Tomlinson later explains that this technique is intentional. "If you got fired, you'd blame it on your boss being a dick. You'd get a beer with your buddies and they'd pat you on the back and say, 'You'll get a better job tomorrow!' But at your team meeting, you get the opposite experience. If you say you lost your job, they'll say, 'We're sorry that happened, but what part of this core relationship with your boss do you have to own? Let's get to the bottom of this, or you'll be back here in two years.'" It seems to be effective, if not exactly polite. It's been a long time since a fistfight has broken out at an MDI meeting, Tomlinson says, but it has happened. "If someone gets pissed off," he says, "that'll intensify the men coming at him because it's touched a nerve."

Tomlinson should know; he's not only the president of MDI, he's also a client. He joined his first team in Toronto some 20 years ago at the urging of his boss, who suggested the meetings might help him understand why he kept getting passed over for promotions at work. "We remind people: You are the common denominator in your own story," says Tomlinson. Anyone who has ever been in therapy will recognize that phrase. What MDI really offers men is a set of action-oriented tools for personal growth and "teammates" to hold them accountable for their own behavior.

At the L.A. meeting, the elephant in the room is Harvey Weinstein and his abuses of power and the wrongs committed by other prominent men. Gregor is eager to address the subject. "If those men had been on a team," he says, "someone would have been holding them accountable before they hurt somebody. Before it was too late."

The nine men in this group come from diverse backgrounds, but they appear to be unified by the feeling of having missed out on something, be it an essential life lesson, rite of passage or guide to a life well lived. MDI helps them fill in those blanks. A man I'll call Jack (late 50s, blue-collar, works in aeronautics) tells me he came to MDI seven years ago, when his marriage was cratering. Jack had been raised by a father who was physically present but emotionally absent, he says. His father

took him camping, but the man never provided guidance. "I was waiting for somebody to tell me what it was to be a man," Jack says, "for someone to say to me, 'These were the rules then, and these are the rules now.'"

What he found in this circle was a group of men willing to take the time to listen, which is increasingly rare. After he owned up to his own shortcomings ("My wife was bored with me; I needed to grow up"), his MDI team helped him rebuild himself and his confidence. For example, Jack had never been good with money—something he felt ashamed about—so his teammates made him treasurer. Encouraging concrete new life skills is just one way the group helps its members; other ways are more abstract.

Abe—the IT specialist—later shared his own story with me, and it was sobering. He'd never met his father, he says, didn't even know who the man was. Abe's mother had struggled with addiction, and his siblings were in and out of foster care. He came to his first team meeting at the age of 40, shortly after his wife kicked him out. His thought patterns were a cesspool of negativity, steeped over a lifetime of self-hate. "I felt like I'm a piece of shit," he says, "and that because I didn't have a father I couldn't be a good father." He wasn't the type of man to ask for help. But by learning to show up for his teammates, he learned to show up for his wife too. After a year, she invited him home. "Without the team," he says in maybe the most earnest voice I've ever heard in L.A., "I wouldn't be married now."

Time and again I hear a similar refrain: The team saved someone's marriage, financial future, even life. It had helped men quit smoking or watch less porn. Or confront their own fathers, which is the central struggle of basically every male coming-of-age story ever told in this town.

It's a difficult time to be a man in America. Professor Rabinowitz, who has hosted his own men's group meeting for 30 years and has a wait list for new members, says he hasn't seen such an influx of interest since the women's liberation movement sent men scrambling to redefine themselves. The whole thing can be corny as hell: At one point during the MDI meeting I attended, one man stared another dead in the eyes, put his hand on the other man's chest and thanked him for living his truth. But it can also be seriously humbling. It takes balls to be so emotionally naked.

The meeting ends at 10 p.m. with the men shouting their team name, Arrowhead, into the sky like some high school football team. Each team chooses its own name. There's a group in New York, I later find out, that calls itself Massive Dump, a juvenile but funny play on the emotional release one feels after a team meeting. "Arrowhead" is more pointed, so to speak, hinting at the difficult work these team members must do on themselves to become better men as they shed bad habits and work through past trauma. "An arrowhead's razor-sharp edge comes from chipping away at what's not needed," says Gregor.

In our post-Weinstein world, a man's best move may be to shut up and listen. But whether in the White House or working the drive-through at White Castle, it's clear we men have work to do—to chip away at the unnecessary, to craft a better instrument. Go, team.

**It takes balls
to be so
emotionally
naked.**

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